

Moera (the manager of the world, handling social matters of right and reason, and answerable to no deity) was having a rough day

Moera (the manager of the world, handling social matters of right and reason, and answerable to no deity) was having a rough day. For the first time in eternity she actually took an evening off...she had a date with a human...and chaos erupts. She had left Fate in charge for the night. She really should have known better than to trust her.

Fate had created a prophecy several weeks ago, and dispatched it using one of her lesser oracles, and, despite Moera's commands, had shifted the balance of good and evil.

Moera did not intend for that particular prophecy to begin its fulfillment for many years.

Fate allowed two people to die before their time. That one mistake could cause evil to reign forever. Fate had always been impulsive; after all, her twin brother was Chance. She had acted without looking to the future to see what her actions could cause.

Moera paced back and forth watching the man who would shape the future of all...Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore had a migraine. He had just been to Godric's Hollow, which was in ruins. How Harry had survived not only the killing curse, but the house collapsing was a miracle.

Harry had always been unusually powerful. Most witches and wizards didn't start to show signs of magic until they were three, but Harry had been using his from the time he was three months old. He would often summon things he wanted, and cause glass to explode when he was upset. Still...babies were not often capable of the level of magic Harry had shown.

Now the only question was, 'Where will Harry live?' As his godfather was about to go to prison for the betrayal of his parents, there was only two options left. One: Harry could go to live with his mother's sister's family, muggles. Or Two: He could go to live with his nearest

Potter relation, Aurora Prewitt Diggory. Harry's grandfather had a sister, and Aurora was her daughter.

Dumbledore had in fact called a meeting with the two people that he trusted above all others. Minerva McGonagall was his best friend, and the love of his life (not that he ever told her that). Severus Snape, out of fear for his best friend's life, had turned to the Light, making an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty to Dumbledore. These two people would help Dumbledore decide the fate of the boy-who-lived.

Knock Knock

"Come in Minerva."

"Hmph," the slender black-haired witch said, "It drives me mental when you do that."

"Ah, well...it is a talent...Lemon Drop?" the Headmaster said, his eyes twinkling.

"No, thank-you," she said primly. She conjured a wooden straight-backed chair, and sat down. "Will anyone else be here for this discussion?"

"Yes, Severus should be arriving momentarily." Just then the fire turned green, and out stepped a tall black-haired, hook-nosed man.

"Albus...Minerva," he said, nodding his head in greeting.

"Severus," Albus said, "Please be seated, we have a lot to discuss. We are here to discuss where Harry should be placed...with his mother's muggle sister, or with his father's cousin, Aurora Diggory. I am worried that, if he were to be raised in the magical world, all of the attention would go to his head. Because of this, I am leaning toward sending him to his muggle aunt. What do you think?"

Severus sneered and answered, "That sounds best to me. The last thing the world needs is another arrogant Potter."

“You can’t be serious?” Minerva said, “Lily told me all about her sister. Harry will be neglected at best, but more likely abused by her.”

“Now, now, Minerva, I really don’t think that she would be capable of harming her own nephew,” Albus said, with a twinkle in his eyes that clearly said, ‘I know better than you.’

“Well...If your sure...,” she said.

“It’s decided. Harry shall live in the muggle world.”

Moera stopped pacing and glared at the image of Dumbledore. That decision could only have bad results.

She turned to look into the pool of ‘What Will Be’ that was continuously changing. What she saw terrified her.

She had to do something. She called a meeting with Athena (goddess of wisdom and war), Nike (goddess of victory), Eros (god of love), and Anteros (god of reciprocated love).

Moera looked around the room gazing into the eyes of each person. “Friends, we are meeting here to discuss the future of Harry Potter. The mortals in charge of his life are going to send him to his mother’s family. If you will all look into the pool, you will see why this is a terrible decision. We must convince them to send him to Aurora Diggory.”

Athena was the first to speak. “Nike, you determine victory, do you think we should interfere?”

“We should. If we do not, Eros and Anteros will die. Should Riddle win, there will be no love left.”

The men looked at each other, and said in unison, “We agree with Nike.”

“So be it,” Athena said. “I will give you the means to change their decision, Moera. I will send to you, from past and future, those who

can change this decision. May your task have the desired results, My Friend.”

As the three professors stood up to leave, there was a blinding white flash of light. They were now standing in a large marble room that had columns in a circle around the edges. A large circular table sat in the very center of the room.

A tall slender woman stood behind one of the chairs at the table. Her blonde curls were piled on her head, and she looked both very old and very young. “Please be seated. My name is Moera. I am here because of Fate. She made a mistake, but you are about to make a worse one. Heed all that shall occur here or Darkness will win.”

Minerva and Severus looked at Albus, determined to follow his lead.

“Moera, we will be honored to hear what you have to say,” Dumbledore said.

The three professors sat at the table.

Five years previously...

Four boys were walking from transfiguration to the Great Hall and talking. Their names were Sirius Black, James Potter, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew.

“Oy, James, lets play a prank on Snivellus,” Sirius said, practically bouncing in excitement.

“No, Sirius,” James said exasperated. “Lily only just agreed to go out with me, and you know how she feels about us pranking him. Besides, he hasn’t done anything to warrant it.”

Lily Evans had been walking, unnoticed, about five feet behind them. Her face lit up when she heard James’ response. She hurried up to him, and kissed him on the cheek, saying, “I am so proud of you, James.”

A moment later, there was a bright white flash of light, and three of the boys and Lily were gone.

Peter looked around in confusion, scratching his head. "Why am I always left behind," he moaned.

Fourteen and a half years after the professors were taken...

Six friends were sharing a compartment on the Hogwarts Express. As the train pulled out of the station to go to London, there was a brilliant flash of light and they disappeared.

Meanwhile, two cars down, a slender aristocratic blonde-haired boy was enjoying his final few hours of freedom before going home for the summer. He had managed to get a compartment to himself by complaining of a migraine. One flash of light later, and he was gone.

Back in the marble room...

Three boys and a girl appeared out of thin air.

Lily Evans looked at the table and screamed. She jumped into James Potter's arms in fright. "Severus is there...table...older...bloody hell."

At her words, the three boys looked at the other people in the room.

"Bloody hell is right," Sirius muttered under his breath.

Remus decided to find out what was going on. Sirius was in shock, and James was trying to calm Lily down. "Err...Professor Dumbledore, what is going on?"

"Ah, yes...this lady is Moera. Apparently Fate made a mistake, and we have been brought here to change what could be a terrible future," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

"Ooookaaaay...", James said. He led the group to the table, and pulled out a chair for Lily before sitting down next to her.

Just as they had all been seated, seven people appeared.

The blonde boy looked at the other six people with him. "Potter! What the bloody hell did you do!?"

The boy with the messy black hair turned to face him, "Malfoy, what makes you think that I did this? I don't go looking for weird stuff to happen around or to me. I am just as confused as you are."

The blonde girl stepped between the two boys and said, "Calm down, boys. I think you are both letting the blue-nosed flutters get to you."

"The what!?" Malfoy said angrily.

"Don't ask," Harry said then, turning to Luna, said, "Thanks, Luna. I really shouldn't let them affect me."

She beamed up at him.

Harry looked at the table and said, "Well hell just froze over. Severus Snape is sitting at the same table as Sirius Black, and nobody has been murdered yet."

Moera laughed. "Please sit down everyone. We have much to discuss."

Remus asked what all of the Marauders were wondering, "Erm...why did none of you ask what you're doing here?"

Harry answered for all of them. "What's the point? I mean, weird events happen to me all the time; this is actually quite tame for my life. This is nothing compared to the year of the Cerberos and the baby dragon."

"Or the year of the diary of doom," Ginny said.

"Let's not forget the year of the Azkaban escapee," Hermione added.

Ron then joined in with, "Or the year of Moldyshort's return."

Harry finished by saying, "And lastly the year of sharing Riddle's mind." He shuddered.

Moera decided that it was time to get on with why they were there. "Why don't we start by introducing ourselves, and saying a fact about who we are. I am Moera; I manage the world, handling social matters of right and reason."

"I am Severus Snape: ex-Death Eater, current spy for the Light, and Potions professor at Hogwarts," Severus sneered.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, and I like Lemon Drops."

A bowl of Lemon Drops appeared in front of him. He popped one into his mouth and hummed a little in enjoyment.

"Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, I am also a cat animagus."

Lily smiled brightly and said, "My name is Lily Evans."

Harry's eyes went wide.

Lily continued, "I am good at charms and potions, and I am Head Girl."

"James Potter, otherwise known as Prongs, Head Boy, and my Lily-flower agreed to go on our first date this weekend." James grinned goofily.

Sirius grinned and said, "Padfoot, otherwise known as Sirius Orion Black, and I am the first Black ever to be sorted into Gryffindor."

"I am Remus John Lupin, prefect, and...erm...I'm known as Moony."

Harry looked at Remus and said, "We all already know about your furry little problem and don't care...well...except for Malfoy."

Remus smiled at him.

Harry then said, "I'm Harry James Potter, son of Lily Evans and James Potter." There were gasps from the seventeen year olds. "I am UNFORTUNATELY known as the boy-who-lived, and all I want is to be just Harry." He looked depressed.

Lily struggled to keep from crying at how sad her son looked. She had no doubts that that was her and James' baby boy.

Ginny hugged Harry, who muttered 'thanks, Gin'.

"I'm Ginny Weasley, I have six older brothers, and Harry saved my life in my first year at Hogwarts." She smiled softly.

Hermione practically bounced as she introduced herself. "Hermione Granger, muggle-born, and I'm best friends with Harry and Ron...oh, and contrary to popular opinion," she glared at Ron, "I am, in fact, a GIRL."

Ron cowered under her glare. "Erm, I am Ron Weasley, Ginny's my little sister, and I will never trust any boys but Harry with her."

"Thanks, Ron," Harry said, "So, Ginny, will you go out with me when we get home?"

"What?" Ginny asked, not understanding him.

Harry blushed, "I...erm...said, 'Ginny, will you go out with me when we get home?'"

"Yes!!" the red-haired girl squealed, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissing him on the cheek.

Harry grinned goofily.

Severus scowled and asked, "What is with Potters and red-heads?"

"Eros placed a charm on the Potter males so that they will only ever love red-heads," Moera said.



“That’ll do it,” Snape muttered.

“Let us continue,” Moera said.

Neville, blushed, saying, “I’m Neville Longbottom, son of Alice and Frank. I was raised by my Gran after my parents were tortured to insanity by Death Eaters.”

“I am Luna Lovegood, and I aspire to meet aliens from another planet.”

Everyone could hear crickets chirping, it was that quiet.

Draco rolled his eyes and said, “Draco Malfoy, Severus is my godfather, and I hate my dad.”

More crickets.

Then...

BANG!!

“You said!”

“No you said!”

They were identical voices.

Laughter could be heard as the two voices continued to argue. An archway appeared on one of the walls, and man entered carrying two teenagers by the back of their robes. The man continued laughing as he dropped them on the floor near the table.

As he turned to leave, Moera said, “Thank you, Hermes.” He just waved in response. As soon as he passed under the arch it disappeared.

The two boys picked themselves up dusting off their robes.

Cries of “Fred, George!!” came from half of the table.

“Hello, All...”

“So, what did we miss?”

Moera laughed, “Just introductions.” Two more chairs appeared in between Neville and Luna.

The two sat down, and everyone reintroduced themselves. When they got to Fred, he turned toward Harry. “Oy, Harry, didja forget to mention something to us?”

Harry turned red, “No, you just never asked me if I knew who the Marauders were.” Harry noticed the puzzled looks on the Marauders’ faces and told them. “Gred and Forge here were the ones to give me the Marauders Map.”

“Why didn’t I give it to you?” James asked, puzzled.

“You didn’t have it. It was marauded from Filch’s file cabinet in the twin’s first year.”

“Ah, that would do it.”

“Anyway...,” Fred drawled, “I’m Fred Weasley, one half of the infamous prankster team of Weasley and Weasley. We have started a joke shop, and all thanks go to our anonymous investor.”

“I’m George, and everything Fred said applies to me as well. Oh, and by the way Harry, thanks for investing in our joke shop.

Harry groaned, and buried his head in his hands. Hermione was crying out ‘how could you’, and Lily yelling ‘Oh Merlin, he’s just like his father, isn’t he’. Minerva and Severus were both yelling ‘NO!!’ at the top of their lungs.

Moera stood and said, “It’s time to get down to business.”

“Why am I here

“Why am I here?” Draco drawled. “I have no desire to hear about the amazing life of the boy-who-lived.”

“You are here to change your destiny Mr. Malfoy. If you do not listen and learn, then your fate will remain the same. Your future involves Mad-Eye Moody, a female brown ferret, and a muggle girl who will name you ‘Kitty’.”

Malfoy shuddered, “Point taken.”

Moera cleared her throat, and began, “First let me inform you that you James, and you Lily died when Harry was only a year old.”

“NO!” James cried out, “Not Lily!”

Lily began to cry, “I’ll never get to see my baby grow up.”

James began to comfort her. When she was calm, Moera continued.

“We are here to decide where Harry should live.”

“With Sirius of course,” James said. “He’s the only person I would name as godfather.”

“Alas,” Albus began, “He betrayed you to Voldemort.”

“No he didn’t!” Harry yelled.

“Mr. Potter, please sit down. I cannot allow you to complete your train of thought. Certain things must remain as they are,” Moera said. “The fact remains that Sirius is unable to raise you at this time. The choices are Petunia Dursley or Aurora Diggory.”

“My son cannot go to live with my sister! She’ll beat him!” Lily screamed. In fact, she started screaming to Petunia even though she wasn’t there.

Harry dashed around the table, turned his mom to face him and softly said, "Okay, Mum, just take a deep breath...good...one more...good. It's no use yelling, Aunt Petunia can't hear you right now. I promise, that once you get back, you can yell at her all you like. Okay?"

Lily's face had returned to its natural color while Harry was talking. "Okay, Harry," she said softly. She hugged him long and hard before allowing him to return to his seat.

"Whoa, Harry, where did you learn how to do that? I've never seen anyone calm Lily down that quickly before," James asked in awe.

"I'm good at staying calm in stressful situations," Harry muttered.

"Let us continue!" Moera said, looking stressed. "Athena...I need help here!" A book appeared out of no where, much to her relief. "Ooh, that'll help. Thank you, Athena," she said. "I will aid you in the decision making process by reading the story of Harry's future, as told by J. K. Rowling..."

## Chapter One: The Boy Who Lived

"Wait...that's Harry!" Sirius said bouncing in his seat.

"Oh, Merlin, why do you hate me? I thought I was finally rid of the dunderhead," Severus muttered. "I need firewhiskey." A bottle of amber liquid appeared on the table in front of him. "Bless you, whoever took pity on me."

Moera continued.

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Private Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Harry's face paled, "Oh, Merlin, I think I'm going to be sick."

"You're not the only one," one of the twins muttered.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills.

Sirius threw his hand up and said, "I have a question...what are drills?"

"They're muggle tools that are used to put holes into things like wood?" Lily answered.

"Oookaaay, muggles are weird," Draco said, a skeptical look on his face.

He was a big beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde, and had nearly twice the amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors.

"Noooo," Lily screamed. "It's...it's...my sister."

Severus shuddered. He remembered her.

The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

"Woah, you mean Dudley was actually small once? I thought he was born the size of a baby killer whale," Harry said.

Snickers were heard from the family of red-heads.

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact Mrs. Dursley pretended that she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be.

"What the bloody hell do they mean good-for-nothing?" James yelled. "I am not good-for-nothing!"

"You could have fooled me," Severus muttered, taking another swig from his bottle.

"James, I don't think you're good-for-nothing. You like taking care of people, and that says a lot about your character," Lily said.

Sirius spoke up, "Yeah, look at all you've done for Remy and me. You adopted me as your brother when my family disowned me. And you supported Remus when a lot of people coughBlackscough would have abandoned him."

"Thank you guys," James said, blushing slightly.

"Shall we continue," Moera asked.

"Yes, Ma'am," the Marauders said as one, all using a sarcastic tone of voice.

The Dursley's shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street. The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son, too, but they had never even seen him. This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away; they didn't want Dudley mixing with a child like that.

"A child like what exactly!" Lily snapped. Her face turned a dangerous shade of red.

"Here, Lily, have some firewhiskey," Severus offered, handing her the bottle. Lily took a long drink before handing it back.

"Thanks, Sev."

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country. Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his highchair.

None of them noticed a large tawny owl flutter past the window.

“GO OWLS!” Fred and George yelled simultaneously, punching the air above them in a way that was reminiscent of cheerleaders.

At half past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek, and tried to kiss Dudley good-bye but missed, because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls. “Little tyke,” chortled Mr. Dursley as...

“Little tyke?!” every male under the age of thirty questioned loudly, all looking at Harry.

“What?? I wasn’t the one who said it you know?” Harry said, “Besides, it’s better than Dinky-Diddydums.”

Every male, including Dumbledore shuddered at this.

“No wonder the kid has issues,” Fred said.

“Yeah, I reckon that would screw anyone up for life,” George agreed.

Moera began again.

...as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four’s drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar – a cat reading a map.

“Go, McGonagall,” the twins cried with another cheerleader type jump.

For a second, Mr. Dursley didn’t realize what he had seen – then he jerked his around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Private Drive, but there wasn’t a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light. Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in his mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Private Drive – no, looking at the sign; cats couldn’t read maps or signs. Mr. Dursley

gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day.

“And I thought Crabbe and Goyle were thick,” Draco muttered.

But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam, he couldn't help noticing that there were a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes – the getups you saw on young people! He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a group of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald green cloak! The nerve of him! But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt – these people were obviously collecting for something...yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on and a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

“Weirdos, Hmph,” Severus muttered. He downed the rest of his firewhiskey, tossed the empty bottle over his shoulder and grabbed the full bottle that appeared in front of him.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor. If he hadn't, he might have found it a little harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl, even at nighttime. Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people. He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more. He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He



didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This bunch were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin. It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard – "

" – Yes, their son, Harry – "

"Their son, Harry, WHAT? What happened?" James cried out.

"Shh," Lily said rubbing James' arm, "It's okay, we'll find out soon."

Moera cleared her throat again.

Mr. Dursley stopped dead.

"Wish he'd drop dead," Severus muttered. "He's got to be the most boring muggle ever."

Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as though he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

"Thank Merlin, I don't think they would have survived the conversation without falling asleep," Severus said.

He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him, seized his telephone,

"Question...What is a telephone?" Malfoy asked.

"It works like a floo call, minus the fireplace and floo powder, and you can't actually see the person's head. You just hear their voice," Hermione answered.

"Ah...You know that actually sounds interesting. I mean...there is nothing worse than getting ash in your hair. Honestly, it's a nightmare...it just sticks to my hair gel like...like a permanent sticking charm was on it."

“Tonight on your local news...ten generations of Blacks and fourteen of Malfoys rolled over in their graves. The impossible occurred when the Malfoy heir stated that he found something about muggles interesting.” Severus gave an impressive performance of a muggle news anchor.

Harry grinned, “Also in tonight’s local news. The entire school of Hogwarts, along with many graduates died tonight because of a freak occurrence. Apparently, Severus Snape, the formidable potions master, made a joke...not just any joke, but a funny one that was about muggles. We will bring you more on this story as it happens. I give you now to my associate, Hermione Granger, who is live on the scene...Hermione.”

“Thank you, Harry. Today we mourn the loss of so many innocents. Now, let’s hear from the brother of one of the victims, Mr. Weasley. Fred?”

“Yes, Hermione, it was just awful, one moment he was standing beside me planning a prank, then we heard...sob...that great joke...it was...was...Professor Snape. George just started laughing...sob...then he stopped and stared in shock at the professor...and he just...just keeled over.”

“Thank you, Fred. It is a truly sad day. As they say, ‘Only the good die young’. Back to you, Harry.”

“We close tonight’s program with a moment of silence for those who lost their lives, and for the families that mourn them.”

Harry, Hermione, Fred, and the Marauders all bowed their heads.

Severus smirked at the students, and took another swig from his bottle.

Moera continued.

...telephone, and had almost finished dialing his home number when he changed his mind. He put the receiver back down and stroked his mustache, thinking... no, he was being stupid. Potter wasn’t such an

unusual name. He was sure there were lots of people called Potter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold. There was just no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset at any mention of her sister. He didn't blame her — if he'd had a sister like that...but all the same, those people in cloaks...

"A sister like what?" James asked dangerously.

"Prongs, when we get home, let's prank her," Sirius said, uncharacteristically serious.

"I was already planning on it, Padfoot. I think that this calls for prank #102... 'Hell in a Handbasket'."

He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone just outside the door.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like your self should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

"Is it true," Remus asked.

"Yes, it's true," Minerva responded sadly.

Lily couldn't help asking, "If it's true then why are you not more excited?"

"Oh, Lily...I just...please, just listen to the story...I'm sure you'll know soon enough," Minerva said, wiping her eyes with Dumbledore's beard.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” James and Sirius said together.

Remus groaned, “I never should have taken you to see Star Wars.”

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn’t approve of imagination.

The five pranksters and Ginny all gasped in horror.

Suddenly, Ginny let out an eardrum bursting scream.

Sirius (as a human) let out an unearthly howl.

Fred and George looked as though they were going to throw-up.

James actually did throw-up.

Remus shook his head and muttered, “Those poor deluded muggles. Such a shame.”

Moera waited until the room was silent, and said, “May I continue now?”

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw — and it didn’t improve his mood — was the tabby cat he’d spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings around its eyes.

“Shoo!” said Mr. Dursley loudly.

Minerva bristled, and glared at the book.

“Dursley’s in trouble...” the twins sang out.

"She's gonna claw him in the butt, isn't she?" Sirius asked excitedly.

"No, no sane person or cat would want to dirty themselves by touching him...especially in the butt region," Harry said.

"Oy, Potter...I thought that you were all for Muggle equality," Draco said.

"I will explain this once, Malfoy, and only once. There are good muggles and bad muggles, just as there are good wizards and bad wizards. Uncle Vernon is a bad muggle. Voldemort is a bad wizard. If Voldie wasn't so anti-muggle, he and Uncle Vernon would get along smashingly. They both want to kill me after all. Between my uncle hitting me and Voldie crucio-ing me, I'm lucky to still be sane," Harry said.

Luna smiled. "Sanity is a matter of opinion. After all, there are some people who think I'm insane, and we all know that I'm not."

"Right then...on with the story," Malfoy said. He didn't insult her because his father had arranged his marriage to her before he was born. Of course, it was also before Xenophilius Lovegood decided to start The Quibbler.

The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look. Was this normal cat behavior?

"It is for Minerva," Dumbledore calmly stated.

"Watch it, Albus. One toe out of line and you'll be sleeping on the couch," Minerva said.

"Yuck...I did not need to hear that," Severus said. He then finished his second bottle of firewhiskey. Unfortunately, he did not get another. Apparently, the person in charge had decided that he was sufficiently sloshed.

"Fred, you owe me five galleons," Ginny said. He passed the coins down to her.

“You bet on whether or not Dumbledore and McGonagall were in a relationship?” Harry asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry. I bet that Dumbledore was getting some. That twinkle is not normal,” Ginny said.

The Marauder’s burst into laughter.

James looked at Harry and said, “I’m proud of you, Son. You picked a good one.”

Harry looked as though he was going to cry. “My dad said that he was proud of me,” he whispered. Ginny leaned over and hugged him.

“Oh, Harry, of course your dad is proud of you. You are an amazing person.”

“Thanks, Gin,” he whispered.

The twins stared in wonder. Harry was the first person, ever, to get away with calling Ginny Gin.

Mr. Dursley wondered. Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Mrs. Dursley had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner all about Mrs. Next Door’s problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word (“Won’t!”). Mr. Dursley tried to act normally. When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:

“And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation’s owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern.” The news caster allowed himself a grin. “Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim

McGuffin with the weather. Going to be anymore showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today. Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars. Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early — it's not until next week folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

"Hmph, shooting stars, indeed. I bet you that was Dedalus Diggle. He's never had much sense," Minerva said.

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair. Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? Mysterious people in cloaks all over the place? And whisper, a whisper about the Potters...

Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Err — Petunia, Dear — you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

"They WHAT!" Lily yelled. "That's low, even for her."

"Watch out, Prongs...she's gonna blow," Sirius said, cowering in his seat.

"Shut up, Padfoot."

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

"Funny stuff on the news," Mr. Dursley mumbled. "Owls...shooting stars...and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today..."

"So?" snapped Mrs. Dursley

"Well, I just thought...maybe...it was something to do with...you know...her crowd."

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips. Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he'd heard the name "Potter." He decided he didn't dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, "Their son — he'd be about Dudley's age now, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

"What's his name again? Howard, isn't it?"

"Harry. Nasty common name, if you asked me."

"I like that name," Lily said. "It's not stuffy like Harold."

"You'd think that they'd like my name BECAUSE it's common. I mean, if I'd been named Orion I'd understand them being upset, because Orion is a strange name in the Muggle world," Harry said.

"Hey! I like the name Orion!" Sirius said.

"Yeah, but Petunia thinks that you're a freak," Lily said.

"Wait...I thought they made up that name especially for me," Harry said.

"They called you a FREAK!" James yelled in shock.

"Yeah...up until I went to primary school I thought it was my name...well...that or Boy."

"Lily, will you come visit me in Azkaban if I murder your sister," James asked.

"James, I won't have to visit. I will be sharing your cell for using the Cruciatus curse on her."

"I love you, Lily."



"I love you too, James."

James' eyes went wide, and his mouth fell open in shock. Lily loved him. A goofy grin spread across his face. "She loves me...Padfoot, Moony, did you hear...she loves me!"

"Yeah, Prongs, we heard. Way to go, mate," Remus said, grinning at his best friend.

Moera rolled her eyes. This was going to take forever.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. "Yes, I quite agree."

He didn't say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it were waiting for something.

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did...if it got out that they were related to a pair of — well, he didn't think he could bear it.

The Dursleys got into bed. Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought before he fell asleep was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs. Dursley. The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about them and their kind...He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on — he yawned and turned over — it couldn't affect them...

How very wrong he was.

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness. It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed on

the next street, nor when two owls swooped overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground.

"Apparition," Harry said matter-of-factly. "Much nicer than flooing."

The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

"Ms. Rowling did do a wonderful job of describing me didn't she?" Albus asked no one in particular.

"Oh, yes, she did a brilliant job. She just forgot to mention one little detail. What was it again? Oh yeah, your arrogance," Minerva muttered.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him. He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

"Hey, Min-min," Sirius started to say.

"Call me Min-min one more time, and you will be hanging by your toenails in the dungeons."

“Oookaaay...Hey, McGee?”

Minerva’s lips twitched. “What, Sirius?”

“Theoretically speaking...if I were to become an animagus dog, would you play tag with me in animal form?”

“You did say theoretically...Correct?” she questioned, her eyes narrowed.

Sirius smiled in an endearing manner. “Of course, I did. I couldn’t possibly hope to hide something like that from you.”

Minerva relaxed slightly. “In that case...I might consider it.”

Gasps were heard around the table.

He found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter. He flicked it open, held it up in the air, and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop.

“Cool,” Harry whispered. “Hey, Professor Dumbledore, theoretically speaking, how much would one of those cost? And where would you get one?”

Albus Dumbledore chuckled. “I am afraid, dear boy, that I have the only one in existence. However, you will be pleased to know that I am leaving it to you in my will.”

“Yeah, but the problem with that is that you have to be dead in order for me to have it. I’d rather have you alive,” Harry said.

Albus wiped a tear from his eye. “I’m honored that you feel that way.”

He clicked it again — the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outter, until the only lights left on the whole street were two pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him. If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn’t be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement. Dumbledore slipped the Put-

Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street toward number four, where he sat down on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

"Hmph, I was in cat form all day. Sitting on a brick wall would make anyone stiff," Minerva said.

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

"Oh, yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no — even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head at the Dursleys' dark living -room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls...shooting stars...Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent — I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle he never had much sense."

Everyone stared at Minerva.

"You're a seer," Sirius said. "I bow before you, Oh-Wise-One."

"Oh, shut up," Minerva said.

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. "We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day You-Know-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the muggles found out about us all. I suppose he really has gone, Dumbledore?"

"It certainly seems so," said Dumbledore. "We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"A what?"

"A lemon drop. They're a kind of Muggle sweet I'm rather fond of."

"No, thank you," said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn't think this was the moment for lemon drops.

"It really wasn't the right time for you to offer one," Minerva said.

"As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone —"

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense — for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort." Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dumbledore, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice. "It all gets so confusing if we keep saying 'You-Know-Who.' I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name."

"I know you haven't," said professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. "But you're different. Everyone knows

you're the only one You-Know-oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of."

"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort had powers I will never have."

"Only because you're too — well — noble to use them."

"Aww," Fred said. "Someone's got a crush."

McGonagall hissed at him, scaring everyone at the table.

"It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs."

James and Sirius began to snicker at the idea of Dumbledore blushing about earmuffs.

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, "The owls are nothing next to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone's saying? About why he's disappeared? About what finally stopped him?"

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she did now. It was plain that whatever "everyone" was saying, she was not going to believe it until Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore however was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

"What they're saying," she pressed on, "Is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric's Hollow. He went to find the Potters. The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are — are — that they're — dead."

James and Lily paled. Even though Moera had told them that they would die, it was just now sinking in that they had less than five years to live.

James looked at Lily. "Lily, seeing as we haven't got much time..." He got down on one knee in front of her chair. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she whispered, tears pouring down her face.

James pulled the Potter signet ring from the index finger of his right hand, and slid it onto her hand. It shrank to fit her. James cleared his throat. "When we get back, I'll buy you a real engagement ring."

"I love you, James."

"I love you too, my Lily," he whispered embracing and kissing her.

Moera smiled, and when the newly engaged couple nodded, she continued reading.

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"Lily and James... I can't believe it...I didn't want to believe it...Oh, Albus..."

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. "I know... I know..." he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on. "That's not all. They're saying he tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry. But — he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke — and that's why he's gone."

Sirius stared at his godson. "Damn, how powerful are you, Harry?"

"It had nothing to do with ME," Harry said. "Mum died to protect me. When she did that, her love formed some sort of protection for me."

"Wow, Lily is awesome," Sirius murmured.

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's — it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done...all the people he's killed... he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding...of all the things to stop him... but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles. Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge. It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes" said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"LIAR," James yelled.

"Why exactly would you have said that he had no family left, when you asked my advice on who he should live with?" Minerva asked.

Dumbledore muttered something that sounded like, "Gunblivetyou."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"I said, 'I was going to Obliviate you.'." He cringed in fear as Minerva glared at him in a way that would make a Basilisk proud.

"You were what?" Minerva said in a deadly whisper. She slowly stood up, still glaring at him and, with a wave of her wand, turned his hair green and his skin silver.

"Now, Minerva, that was just cruel," Severus said.



“You’re my hero,” Draco said in awe.

Minerva smiled and, sitting down, said, “Thank you.”

“You don’t mean — you can’t mean the people who live here?” cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. “Dumbledore — you can’t. I’ve been watching them all day. You couldn’t find two people who are less like us. And they’ve got this son — I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!”

“It’s the best place for him,” said Dumbledore firmly. “His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he’s older. I’ve written them a letter.”

“Yeah right...Like they’d ever tell me that my parents were a witch and wizard. That’s about as likely to happen as Voldemort declaring his undying love for me,” Harry said.

“A letter?” repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. “Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He’ll be famous — a legend — I wouldn’t be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future — there will be books written about Harry — every child in our world will know his name!”

“Unfortunately...Absolutely no privacy,” Harry muttered.

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. “It would be enough to turn any boy’s head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won’t even remember! Can’t you see how much better off he’ll be, growing up away from all that until he’s ready to take it?”

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, “Yes — yes, you’re right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?” She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

“Hagrid’s bringing him.”

“You think it — wise — to trust Hagrid with something as important as this?”

“I would trust Hagrid with my life,” said Dumbledore.

“I do too,” the people from the future, and the people from the past all said in unison. The two groups looked at each other, grinning.

“I’m not saying his heart isn’t in the right place,” said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, “but you can’t pretend he’s not careless. He does tend to — what was that?”

“You know...I hate to admit it, but she’s right,” Harry said.

“WHAT!?” Ron yelled. “How can you, of all people, say that?”

“Oh...I don’t know...FLUFFY, NORBERT, the Philosopher’s Stone, Aragog...”

Ron shuddered.

“...Buckbeak, and Grawp.”

“Is anyone else wondering what their talking about,” Remus whispered to Sirius.

“Fluffy was the Cerberos. Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback, he got when he was drunk and playing cards, during which time he told someone the secret on how to get past Fluffy. The Philosopher’s Stone was what Fluffy was guarding, and Voldemort was trying to steal it. Aragog is and Acromantula. His kids tried to eat us. Malfoy here insulted Buckbeak the Hippogriff and got injured. He then tried to get Hagrid fired, even though he hadn’t been paying attention in class so the injury was his own fault.” Harry glared at Draco as though daring him to argue. “And Grawp is Hagrid’s younger, full-giant, brother.”

James face went ashen, “Bloody hell, you’ve met all of those creatures?”

“Yeah, but the only bad one was Aragog.”

“My son is so brave,” Lily said to Professor McGonagall.

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky — and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

“Ooh, Lily, can I get one...PLEEEASE?” James begged.

“NO, and that is my final answer!”

“I’ll get one James, and you can borrow it,” Sirius offered.

“Awesome, thanks, Siri.”

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild — long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash cans lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

“Hagrid,” said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. “At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?”

“Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir,” said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. “Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I’ve got him, sir”

“I KNEW IT!” Sirius yelled. “I AM SO COOL!”

“And so modest,” Hermione said, grinning at him.

“No problems, were there?”

“No, sir — house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin’ around. He fell asleep as we were flyin’ over Bristol.”

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his fore head they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lighting.

“Is that where —?” whispered Professor McGonagall.

“Yes” said Dumbledore. “He’ll have that scar forever.”

Harry groaned and muttered, “Unfortunately.”

“Couldn’t you do something about it, Dumbledore?”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground.

Everyone turned and stared at Dumbledore.

“I need another drink,” Snape said suddenly.

A bottle of water appeared in front of him.

“Oh Ha Ha Ha,” he said snarkily.

“Well — give him here, Hagrid — we’d better get this over with.”

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursleys’ house

“Could I — Could I say good-bye to him, sir?” asked Hagrid. He bent his great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

“Poor Hagrid,” Ginny whispered softly.

“Shhh!” hissed Professor McGonagall, “you’ll wake the Muggles!”

“S-s-sorry,” sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. “But I c-c-can’t stand it — Lily an’ James dead — an’ poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles —”

“Yes, yes, it’s all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we’ll be found,” Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry’s blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid’s shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to have gone out.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore finally, “that’s that. We’ve no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations.”

“Yeah,” said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, “I’ll be takin’ Sirius his bike back. G’night, Professor McGonagall — Professor Dumbledore, sir.”

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorcycle and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

“I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall,” said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once, and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so that Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street. He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

“Good luck, Harry,” he murmured. He turned on his heel and with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing thing to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours’ time by Mrs. Dursley’s scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley...He couldn’t know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: “To Harry Potter — the boy who lived!”

“That’s the end of the first chapter,” Moera said. “I dare not hope that the second will go any faster...Now...I have a date. That means that you will each have to take a turn at reading a chapter. That means you go first Severus. I’ll be back later. Bye.” She dashed out an archway that immediately disappeared again.

Severus groaned. “If I’m going to read, then the powers-that-be had better give me some firewhiskey.

A fresh bottle appeared.

“Thank-you,” he said curtly.

10 points to the house of your choice if you can guess what movie ‘Hell in a Handbasket’ came from; and an extra twenty points to the one who can give the name of the actor who said it.

## Chapter two: The Vanishing Glass

“Shall we begin then,” Snape said silkily. Without waiting for a response he began to read.

## Chapter two: The Vanishing Glass

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room, which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls. Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets – but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

“Wait-wait-wait,” Draco said, turning to Snape. “You said that Potter was worshipped at home.”

“I have no idea what I may or may not have said about Potter to you. You are, right now, only two,” Severus said.

“Oh...right, I forgot that you're a younger version of the Severus I know.”

“I shall continue.”

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

“Up! Get up! Now!”

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

“Up!” she screeched. Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove. He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it. He had a funny feeling he’d had the same dream before.

His aunt was back outside the door.

“Are you up yet?” she demanded.

“Nearly,” said Harry.

“Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don’t you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy’s birthday.”

Harry groaned.

“What did you say?” his aunt snapped through the door.

“Nothing, nothing...”

Dudley’s birthday – how could he have forgotten? Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

“WHAT!!” James Potter was furious. “Harry, tell me that this Rowling person got it wrong. Tell me that you didn’t sleep in a cupboard.”

“If I did say that, it would be a lie,” Harry said, looking down.

Ron started violently when Harry confirmed it. “Oy, Harry, how come you never told me that?”



“Oh yeah, there’s a great conversation starter...Hi, Ron, my name’s Harry. I sleep in a cupboard under the stairs, and, until I started school, I didn’t even know my own name.”

Ron winced. “I take back every stupid jealous thing I ever said.”

“Why didn’t you tell a teacher at school? They could have helped you,” Hermione said incredulously.

“I did, Hermione. Uncle Vernon convinced them that I was a lying attention-seeker. After that, they treated me like I was a convicted murderer.”

“What about when you got to Hogwarts?” This came from Lily.

Harry looked shocked. “You’ve got to be kidding me...My Hogwarts letter was addressed to the cupboard under the stairs. Since they already knew, I didn’t see the point in bringing it up. It was obvious that no one cared.”

Ginny and Luna were in tears. The boy that everyone looked at to rescue them, was the one in need of rescuing.

Severus decided to continue reading in the hopes that it would distract the girls. He’d never been good with crying females.

When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley’s birthday presents. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise – unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley’s favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn’t often catch him. Harry didn’t look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley’s, and Dudley was about four times bigger

than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him in the nose.

Lily glared at Dumbledore. "If you DARE place my baby with those – those PEOPLE, I promise that I will come back and haunt you. I will make Mrs. Black look like a caring and sensitive woman." Her green eyes glowed like the killing curse. No one had any doubts that Lily would keep that promise.

Severus hurriedly began to read again.

The only thing Harry liked about his appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it.

"In the car crash when your parents died," she had said. "And don't ask questions."

"Car crash?" Severus muttered, taking a long drink from his bottle. "No car crash could kill Lily Evans. One Arresto Momentum, and the car would stop."

"Damn those Dursleys," Sirius muttered. The look on his face was usually reserved for the Blacks, but he made an exception in this case.

Don't ask questions – that was the first rule to a quiet life with the Dursleys.

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

"Comb your hair!" he barked by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must

have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way – all over the place.

“Too right,” James said. “I’ve given up trying to get my hair to lay flat.”

“So instead you just make it messier,” Lily said.

“Yup.”

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel – Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Snorts were heard from around the table.

“Good one, Harry,” one of the twins said. “We should make a product for the shop. PigWig Potions: One sip and you’ll look like a pig in a wig; perfect for that one family member that eats like a pig.”

Harry and Hermione looked at Ron.

“What?” he asked.

Hermione gave a resigned sigh. “I give up...Please continue, Professor.”

Harry put the plates of eggs and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn’t much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

“Thirty-six,” he said, looking up at his mother and father. “That’s two less than last year.”

“I never even get that many presents on my birthday,” Draco said. “Spoiled brat!”

“For once, Malfoy, you and I agree on something,” Ron said.

“Darling, you haven’t counted Auntie Marge’s present, see, it’s here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy.”

“Alright, thirty-seven then,” said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

“And my sister, Petunia, puts up with that sort of behavior?” Lily asked.

“Not exactly, Mum.”

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, “And we’ll buy you another two presents while we’re out today. How’s that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that all right?”

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, “So I’ll have thirty...thirty...”

“Thirty-nine, sweetums,” said Aunt Petunia.

“Oh.” Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. “All right then.”

“So instead of saying ‘get over it, kid’, she just gives in. I thought Petunia had better sense than that. Obviously I was wrong.” Lily turned to Severus, “Pass the bottle over here, Sev. I’m going to need something to get through this chapter.”

He handed her the bottle, and continued.

Uncle Vernon chuckled.

“Little tyke wants his money’s worth, just like his father. ‘Atta boy, Dudley!” He ruffled Dudley’s hair.

“Oh, Merlin, they’re encouraging him.” Remus turned to Lily, “Oy, Lily, I think I need a drink now. I cannot believe that you are actually related to them.”

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR. He was ripping the paper off of a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

“Bad news, Vernon,” she said. “Mrs. Figg’s broken her leg. She can’t take him.” She jerked her head in Harry’s direction.

Dudley’s mouth fell open in horror, but Harry’s heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley’s birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or to the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she’d ever owned.

“Poor Arabella,” Dumbledore said.

“Poor Arabella, THAT’S ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY,” Lily snapped. “THEY TREAT MY BABY LIKE – LIKE HE’S NOT HUMAN AND ALL YOU CAN SAY IS POOR ARABELLA?!”

“Now what?” said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he’d planned this. Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn’t easy when he reminded himself that it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbles, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

“We could phone Marge,” Uncle Vernon suggested.

“Don’t be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy.”

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn’t there – or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn’t understand them, like a slug.

Fred turned to George and said, “Prank #97: ‘Operation Hallucination’.”

“Ooh, good idea...Just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“How do we get the sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot to drink it? They don’t make Harry cook anymore.”

Fred grinned evilly, “We turn it into a powder, fill an envelope with it, and send it to the Muggles. They open the letter, and POOF! The powder is airborne, and they inhale it.”

“They’re bloody brilliant, aren’t they, James,” Sirius said in awe.

“Yup, totally brilliant...Why didn’t WE ever do that?” James asked rhetorically.

“What about what’s-her-name, your friend – Yvonne?”

“On vacation in Majorca,” snapped Aunt Petunia.

“You could just leave me here,” Harry put in hopefully (he’d be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley’s computer).

“What’s a computer?” Ginny asked.

“It’s a machine that you can play games on, and look up information. You can do other stuff as well, but I don’t really know how to describe it,” Hermione said.

“You don’t know how to describe something?” Ron looked as though the foundation of his life had been shaken.

“Believe it or not, Ronald, I do not know everything.”

“Oh.”

Aunt Petunia looked as though she’d just swallowed a lemon.

“And come back and find the house in ruins?” she snarled.

“I won’t blow up the house,” said Harry, but they weren’t listening.

“I suppose we could just take him to the zoo,” said Aunt Petunia slowly “...and leave him in the car....”

“That car’s new, he’s not sitting in it alone....”

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn’t really crying – it had been years since he’d really cried – but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

“Dinky Duddydums, don’t cry, Mummy won’t let him spoil your special day!” she cried, flinging her arms around him.

“I...don’t...want...him...t-t-to come!” Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. “He always sp-spoils everything!” He shot Harry a nasty look through the gap in his mother’s arms.

“This kid has got to be the most annoying person EVER!” Severus snapped.

Minerva smiled and said, “No, that title is reserved for Albus.”

Albus Dumbledore looked as though he were going to protest that, but then...

“Couch,” Minerva said, smirking. The often revered man looked completely cowed.

Just then the doorbell rang – “Oh, good Lord, they’re here!” said Aunt Petunia frantically – and a moment later, Dudley’s best friend, Piers Polkiss, walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people’s arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once.

“IT’S A SKINNY WORMTAIL!” Sirius screamed.

Harry looked horrified. “I never noticed it before...but Sirius is right. Piers does look like a skinny Wormtail. I think I’m going to be sick.”

Ron turned a funny shade of green and began rocking back-and-forth humming under his breath.

“What’s wrong with Ron?” Neville asked.

“Nothing,” Hermione said cheerfully. “Ron, look...FOOD!” Sure enough, platters of food had appeared on the table. Ron instantly snapped to attention and began stuffing a sandwich into his mouth.

Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn’t believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys’ car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life. His aunt and uncle hadn’t been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they’d left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

“I’m warning you,” he had said, putting his large purple face right up close to Harry’s. “I’m warning you now, boy – any funny business, anything at all – and you’ll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas.”

“You know, he lied. I was only in the cupboard for a few weeks,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“I’m not going to do anything,” said Harry, “honestly...”



“Well...I didn't INTENTIONALLY do anything.”

But Uncle Vernon didn't believe him. No one ever did.

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn't make them happen.

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barber looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left “to hide that horrible scar.” Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry, who spent a sleepless night imagining school the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses. Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find that his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off. He had been given a week in his cupboard for this, even though he had tried to explain that he couldn't explain how it had grown back so quickly.

“YES! My son is a Metamorphmagus,” James cried out.

“I am?”

Hermione's eyes widened. “Yes...didn't you know, only Metamorphmagi can change their appearance without glamour charms.”

“Of course not, Hermione. This is like that when I first told you about my hidden talent. I thought loads of people could do it. But in reality only two people alive can...me included.”

“Oh...you mean that you can sp...” Hermione slapped her hand over Ron's mouth before he could blab it to the room.

“Not now, Ronald!”

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls). The

harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry. Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much to Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney. The Dursleys had received an angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them that he had been climbing school buildings. But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trash cans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him mid-jump.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong. It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

"Wait...you had never gone anywhere before?" Neville asked.

"Nope, nowhere."

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects.

"Gee...do you think he likes to complain about Harry?" Remus asked.

"Aww, I dunno, Remy...seems to me that he likes to complain about Harry," Sirius responded.

George grinned. "Nope. He likes to complain about Harry."

"Will you be quiet!" Snape snapped.

This morning it was motorcycles.

“...roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums,” he said, as a motorcycle overtook them.

“YES! I am going to fulfill my dreams of becoming a hoodlum!” Sirius yelled out.

Luna smiled and said, “Congratulations.”

“I had a dream about a motorcycle,” said Harry, remembering suddenly. “It was flying.”

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: “MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!”

“Oh, yes, they do...sometimes,” Sirius said.

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

“I know they don't,” said Harry. “It was only a dream.”

But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than him asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon – they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

Sirius began to bounce up and down. “Ooh, ooh, ooh...I want to get dangerous ideas. Can I watch some cartoons, Mummy, please, may I?” He begged Lily.

“Maybe when we get home, but only if you promise to be good,” she said.

“Oh, I promise,” he said Siriously...oops, I mean seriously.

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked

Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop.

“Erm, Minerva?” Dumbledore asked.

“What do you want?” she asked in an exasperated tone.

“I want a lemon ice pop. Can we go to the zoo this summer so that I can try one? Please?”

She arched a brow at him. “The Marauders are rubbing off on you. I don’t like it...Continue Severus.

It wasn’t bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn’t blond.

Harry snorted. “Too right.”

Harry had the best morning he’d had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn’t fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn’t have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

“Uh-oh. That sound ominous.”

“Wow, Sirius, you just said a three syllable word. I’m proud of you,” Remus said, grinning.

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood

and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can – but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself – no company except stupid people drumming their fingers against the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:

"I get that all the time."

“I know,” Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn’t sure if the snake could hear him. “It must be really annoying.”

The snake nodded vigorously.

“Harry...is...a...parseltongue,” James stuttered.

“Thanks, Dad. You know I always wondered if you would be upset with me over that or not. It’s good to finally know the truth. And here I thought that being friends with a werewolf made you more open to things like this.”

“I didn’t mean to sound that way, Harry. I was just shocked. I’m not upset about it. It’s just a really rare gift,” James looked desperate to get his son’s forgiveness.

“Next time I won’t forgive you so quickly,” Harry said, allowing a little smile to slip onto his face.

“Thank you, Harry.” James looked relieved.

Snape looked mad. “And moving on...”

“Where do you come from, anyway?” Harry asked.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

“Was it nice there?”

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on: This specimen was bred in the zoo. “Oh, I see – so you’ve never been to Brazil?”

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of them jump. “DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON’T BELIEVE WHAT IT’S DOING!”

“Oh shit.” Draco looked scared. “That is very, very bad.”

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

“Out of the way, you,” he said, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened – one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor’s tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.

“GO, HARRY!” James and Sirius yelled, jumping up and high-fiving each other.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, “Brazil, here I come....Thanksss, amigo.”

“I wish I could talk to snakes.”

Everyone stared at Luna in shock.

The keeper of the reptile houses was in shock.

“But the glass,” he kept saying. “where did the glass go?”

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn’t done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon’s car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg, while Piers was swearing it had tried to squeeze him to death. But worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, “Harry was talking to it, weren’t you, Harry?”

“Double shit,” Draco said, gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house before starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, “Go – cupboard – stay – no meals,” before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn’t know what time it was and he couldn’t be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn’t risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

“That’s a Marauder for you...sneaking into kitchens in the middle of the night.” James beamed at Harry.

“Ten points from Gryffindor.”

“B-but McGee...” James said.

“I stand by the deduction.” She glared at him.

He’d lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he’d been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn’t remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burning pain on his forehead.

“You remember that?” Albus asked, leaning forward.

“Yes...actually, after I met a dementor for the first time, I could remember even more of that night.”

“I am so sorry, dear boy.”



This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from. He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

James growled.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family. Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top hat bowed once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man, Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a closer look.

"That's because they can apparate." Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Well, duh, Sirius. I know that now. I didn't then," Harry said sarcastically.

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

"Prankster huddle!" James yelled.

The twins went to the other side of the room, and began whispering with the Marauders, making the professors all shift uneasily in their seats.

"Someone kill me now," Severus said. "I just want to die."

“Ah, but I have a mission for you,” Dumbledore said.

“So, what’s your little problem got to do with me?” Severus sneered.

“Not a damn thing.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Is it dangerous?”

“Well, you probably won’t live through it,” Albus said bluntly.

“By Merlin, do you really think so?”

“Well, everybody else we’ve bumped into has died. Why not you?”  
Harry said.

“Indeed,” Severus muttered. “Why not?”

Two hidden movie references.

Severus Snape shoved the book into Professor Dumbledore's hands and said, "Thank Merlin, I no longer have to read."

Dumbledore smiled as he took a sip of Mountain Dew. (Hey if he can like Muggle candy, then why not soda as well)

"Ah, interesting title..." he began.

### Chapter Three: The Letters From No One

"That is absolutely ridiculous. The letters had to come from someone, otherwise they wouldn't exist," Minerva said.

"Ah, Minerva, that reminds me of the age old question... 'Where did the watch come from in Somewhere In Time?' ...If she gave it to him, and he left it with her, how could it even exist?" Albus said, smiling at his wife and Deputy Headmistress.

Severus was not happy. "Just continue reading so that we can get this over with."

The escape of the Brazilian Boa Constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and the first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Severus glared at the book. "That brat needs to be taught a lesson."

Harry burst into laughter.

"WHAT?!"

"Nothing, Sir...I just pictured Dudley meeting you, and trying to intimidate you," Harry said, grinning.

The students from the future all burst into laughter. All of them knew what Snape was like when people acted arrogant around him. If

Dudley ever did meet him, his self-esteem would be shot, and he would probably have nightmares for years to come.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader.

"What is this, survival of the fittest on the nature channel?" Hermione asked. "Honestly, no one with any common sense would obey the stupidest person they know."

"Ah, but Her-my-own," George began, batting his eyelashes in what he seemed to think was a flirtatious manner, but in reality looked more like he had a nervous tic.

Fred continued with, "It was already pointed out..."

"...that none of them have any common sense," George finished.

"Oh, right, sorry for interrupting."

Dumbledore smiled genially, "Do not apologize, dear girl. You made a very good point. Perhaps young Mr. Malfoy should consider your words."

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

"Hey! Twins!" Malfoy said, grinning evilly. "I have an idea..."

"What?" they questioned.

"It involves a house elf, a permanent sticking charm, a plate of doughnuts, and a cat that's been trained to attack whenever the fat kid tries to get food."

The twins looked at each other and smiled identical evil grins.

“I call it ‘Operation Diet’.”

“Well...the name needs a little work,” George said, “but the plan is good.”

That was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn’t be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon’s old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

“Wait-wait-wait...” James said. “What do you mean, Harry was going to Stonewall High?”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I go to Hogwarts. I just didn’t know it at that point.”

“But why would your cousin think that it’s funny?” Remus asked.

“Wait for it...” Harry said.

They stuff people’s heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall,” he told Harry. “Want to come upstairs and practice.”

Albus Dumbledore began to chuckle, pointing at the book.

“What’s so funny about Dudley threatening my baby?” Lily snapped, her face as red as any Weasley’s.

“Absolutely nothing, Miss Evans. I was reading ahead.”

“No, thanks,” said Harry. “The poor toilet’s never had anything as horrible as your head down it – it might be sick.” Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he’d said.

The room burst into laughter. James and Sirius were banging the table with their hands. Fred fell out of his seat, and George was having trouble breathing, he was laughing that hard. Ginny was wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. Lily was leaning on Professor McGonagall because she couldn't hold herself upright.

Luna gave a loud screech of laughter and said, "T-t-toi-le-et," in between more screeches of laughter.

Neville was bent over clutching his stomach, and Hermione was trying to remain calm but every few seconds another snicker would escape.

Dumbledore was again chuckling, and Snape had let out a genuine smile.

Everyone stopped laughing.

"What?" Snape asked, still grinning.

"You're smiling," Neville said. "That's bloody terrifying."

"Why would my smiling be terrifying?"

"Because, your soul is an appalling dung-heap, overflowing with the most disgraceful assortment of deplorable rubbish imaginable, mangled up in tangled up knots," Ginny said smoothly.

Hermione hid a smile and said, "You have termites in your smile. You have all the tender sweetness of a seasick crocodile. Given the choice between the two of you, I'd take the seasick crocodile."

"What does a crocodile have to do with Snape smiling?" Draco said, puzzled.

"It's from a movie...You know, you really should have taken Muggle Studies," Ginny said.

Professor Dumbledore looked over the top of his glasses and said, "Shall we continue."

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for years.

"I think I'm still prying some of that out of my teeth...it's either that, or one of Hagrid's stoat sandwiches," Harry commented.

"Eeww..." Hermione said. "I'm giving you floss for your birthday this year."

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats,

The guys shuddered.

...orange knickerbockers,

The girls cringed.

...and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other when the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

"Dudley is going to be one of those people who grow up and go to psychiatrists to complain about how everything is their mother's fault," Lily said. "And that really isn't far off from the truth...It's also his father's fault."

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life.

James winced. "His life must be sewage then."

Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up.

Sirius snorted.

Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

"Oh, Harry, just let it out," said Fred.

George grinned. "Yeah, it's not healthy to bottle up your emotions like that."

Hermione and Ron burst into laughter.

"What's so funny," Lily asked Ginny.

"Oh...last summer Harry was mad because they couldn't tell him anything in their letters, and he was going crazy from a lack of news. When he finally arrived at...erm...where we were, he just started yelling about how frustrated he was, and how lucky we were to all be together while he was stuck in purgatory," Ginny said. "The twins actually said something similar to him at the time, about not bottling up his emotions."

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.

"Your new school uniform."

"Wait...she did not say new school uniform," Sirius asked, "did she?"



“That’s what she said,” Remus said. “But we’ve already established that she’s a liar.”

“Ah...right.”

Harry looked into the bowl again.

“Oh,” he said, “I didn’t realize it had to be so wet.”

“Let me just interrupt here to say, I was making a joke.” Harry said, “I am not that thick.”

“Don’t be stupid,” snapped Aunt Petunia. “I’m dying some of Dudley’s old school thing gray for you. It’ll look just like everyone else’s when I’ve finished.”

Harry seriously doubted this,

“Understatement of the century.”

...but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how going to look on his first day at Stonewall High – like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

“Bad visual,” Lily said, shuddering.

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry’s new uniform.

“Again with the ‘new’.” Sirius was disgusted.

Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

“Get the mail Dudley,” said Uncle Vernon from behind the paper.

“YES! They’re finally making the fat kid do some work,” Draco said, leaning forward in eagerness.

“Make Harry get it.”

“Get the mail Harry.”

Draco groaned.

“Make Dudley get it.”

“GO, HARRY!” yelled the Marauders.

“Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley.”

“What do they think is...a dog?” Minerva asked.

“No...think lower than a dog,” Harry muttered in response.

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon’s sister Marge,

Harry snickered, thinking about the summer before his third year.

James, Sirius and Remus all looked questioningly at him.

“Later,” Harry said, grinning.

...who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and – a letter for Harry.

“Hogwarts letter!” James said.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band.

“A WHAT?” Neville asked.

“An elastic band is a stretchy band that you can use to hold stuff together, like papers, or even hair,” Hermione said.

Neville was still confused, but decided to just let it go.

No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives – he didn’t belong to the library, so he’d never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake.

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment and the address was written in emerald green ink. There was no stamps.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Duh, owl post.”

“Duh...Muggles,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

“Hurry up, boy!” shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. “What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Gred, you got that...right.”

“Yep, Forge...I got it. Wartcap powder, or the as-of-yet-untested-powder-like-substance.” He was scribbling in a blue notebook, using

a ballpoint pen. (They are the sons of Arthur Weasley, and it's quicker than a quill)

"Gred? Do you even have to ask?"

"The second one it is then."

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk..."

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Harry's got something!"

"Tattletale," five pranksters said as one.

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights.

"What are traffic lights?"

"Draco, haven't you ever been to Muggle London?" Hermione asked.

"Of course not...my father would never have let me go. I tried to sneak out of the Leaky Cauldron once when I was fourteen, but my dad caught me. I spent the rest of the summer reading Dark Arts

books on the best way to torture Muggles. Father felt that my showing curiosity about them was a sign of weakness.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe we can help you sneak out to see it sometime,” Hermione offered.

“I may just hold you to that,” he said, smiling a little. “So, what are traffic lights?”

“They are lights that signal to automobiles, when they can go, or have to stop.”

“I think that may be something that I’d have to see to understand fully.”

“You’re probably right.”

And it didn’t stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

“I didn’t know it was possible for a person’s face to change colors that quickly,” James said.

Lily whispered, “I didn’t know either.”

“P-P-Petunia!” he gasped.

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

“Vernon! Oh my goodness – Vernon!”

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn’t used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

“Poetic justice,” Lily said, a smug look on her face.

“I want to read that letter,” he said loudly.

“I want to read it,” said Harry furiously, “as it’s mine.”

“Get out, both of you,” croaked Uncle Vernon,

“He sounded the way that you would have thought the Umbitch – sorry, Unbridge person to sound,” Harry said.

...stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn’t move.

“I WANT MY LETTER!” he shouted.

“Let me see it!” demanded Dudley.

“OUT!” roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.

“Vernon,” Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, “look at the address – how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don’t think they’re watching the house?”

“Watching – spying – might be following us,” muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.

“But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don’t want –”

Harry could see Uncle Vernon’s shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

“No,” he said finally. “No, we’ll ignore it. If they don’t get an answer.... Yes, that’s best...we won’t do anything....”

“But – ”

“I’m not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn’t we swear when we took him in we’d stamp out that dangerous nonsense?”

“ ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE!!” McGonagall screamed. “WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WERE YOU THINKING TO EVEN CONSIDER PLACING HIM WITH THOSE – THOSE MONSTERS!”

“STAMP OUT...DANGEROUS NONSENSE!” James was on his feet glaring daggers at the Headmaster.

Lily said very softly, in a tone that promised a slow and painful death to anyone who crossed her, “If you place my son with them, it will be the last thing you ever do.”

Dumbledore was ashen faced. “Let’s at least see how this turns out before we make any decisions.”

They sat down, but all of them continued to glare at Dumbledore.

Right as he was about to continue reading, Albus looked up and saw Draco Malfoy glaring at him, wand hand twitching slightly, as though he was barely preventing himself from casting the Cruciatus curse on Dumbledore.

When Albus did start reading again, it was with a slightly squeaky voice.

That evening when he got home from work, Uncle Vernon did something he’d never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

“Where’s my letter?” said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. “Who’s writing to me?”

“No one. It was addressed to you by mistake,” said Uncle Vernon shortly. “I have burned it.”

“It was not a mistake,” said Harry angrily, “it had my cupboard on it.”

“SILENCE!” yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

“Er – yes, Harry – about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking...

“Must have been painful,” Severus said; then he downed the second half of his bottle of firewhiskey.

...you’re really getting a bit big for it...we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley’s second bedroom.”

“Why?” said Harry.

“Don’t question it, Harry, just accept the room!” Sirius begged.

“Sirius, I was going to accept the room. I just wanted to know the real motivation behind the move.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t ask questions!” snapped his uncle. “Take this stuff upstairs, now.”

The Dursley’s house had four bedrooms; one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon’s sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn’t fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room.

Remus growled...LOUDLY. “Full moon...three weeks,” he muttered.



James and Sirius looked at him. "If you do that, then we want to be there to watch the results."

"Okay."

He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was laying on top of a small working tank that Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been cancelled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

"That explains a lot," Draco muttered.

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, "I don't want him up there...I need that room...make him get out..."

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof,

"Poor Turtle...He was so young," Harry said.

Hermione looked at him, confused. "Harry, it was a tortoise not a turtle."

"Oh, I know that, but Dudley was never very creative...He named his tortoise, Turtle."

...and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing that he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry,

“Nooo...that's not suspicious at all...is it Harry,” Fred asked sarcastically.

Harry smirked. “Well I certainly didn't get my talent for solving mysteries from experience. The Dursleys wouldn't know subtle if it knocked on their front door and asked for a cup of tea.”

...made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, “There's another one! ‘Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive –’”

With a strangled cry,

“Who's the lucky person, who got to strangle him?” Snape asked, a vicious glint in his eye.

...Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind.

“So Harry's the lucky one, then.” Snape smirked.

After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

“Go to your cupboard – I mean, your bedroom,” he wheezed at Harry. “Dudley – go – just go.”

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't

received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door –

“AAAAARRGH!”

Everyone screamed, when Dumbledore let out a loud cry.

“Albus! Never scare me like that again!” Minerva snapped, as she hit his right arm several times.

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat – something alive!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face.

Everyone groaned in frustration.

Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.

“I want –” he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.

Uncle Vernon didn't go into work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

“See,” he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, “if they can’t deliver them they’ll just give up.”

“I’m not sure that’ll work, Vernon.”

“Oh, these people’s minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they’re not like you and me,” said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

“Does anyone else think that HE’S the fruitcake?” Sirius asked.

Draco’s hand was in the air in an instant, but he lowered it as Luna said, dreamily, “I like fruitcake.”

Crickets could be heard.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn’t go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and even a few forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry had found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

“Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?” Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

“No post on Sundays,” he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, “no damn letters today –”

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one –

“Out! OUT!”

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

“That does it,” said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. “I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We’re going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!”

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue.

“The image I have of that fat walrus with half his mustache missing is going to be my Patronus memory,” Snape said, grinning blissfully.

“I wonder if your Patronus will change form then.” Harry mused aloud.

“Expecto Patronum...” Severus yelled, with a wave of his wand. Much to Harry’s satisfaction, the form was indeed a walrus.

Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffing in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head

for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

“Idiot,” Remus muttered.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while

“Shake 'em off...shake 'em off,” he would mutter whenever he did this.

Ginny grinned broadly. “I'm gonna send him a Howler that says ‘I'm watching you, Dursley’. Do you think he'll scream like a little girl?”

“Undoubtedly,” Harry answered. He knew there was a reason he liked her.

They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

“It's about time that the brat learned that you don't always get what you want,” Neville commented idly.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering....

They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

“’ Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk.”

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:

Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

“I’ll take them,” said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

“Wouldn’t it be better just to go home, dear?” Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn’t seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

“Daddy’s gone mad, hasn’t he?” Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon.

“Why, yes, Dudley, he has. So kind of you to notice,” Severus said sarcastically. “Another bottle of firewhiskey would be nice.” Sadly, no bottle appeared. A stress ball, however did.

Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.

“It’s Monday,” he told his mother. “The Great Humberto’s on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television.”

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday – and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days of the week, because of television – then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun – last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Severus' stress ball exploded, he had squeezed it so hard.

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

His right eye started to twitch.

A vial of a calming draught appeared in front of him.

He snatched it from the table, and downed it.

"Aaahh..."

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon, gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"



It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

"Albus, can I just murder him...please..." Snape begged.

"Now, Severus, just because a person is a rude, terrible excuse for a human being, does not mean that it is okay to murder him. That said, I give you permission to torture him so that he'll have nightmares for the rest of his life." Dumbledore smiled benevolently before continuing...

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

Draco growled. "I think I found the Muggle that I'm going to practice the Cruciatus on."

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry that he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HARRY!" the Marauders shouted.

"Thanks, Dad...Sirius, Remus."

Five minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

"Does anyone else think that something is about to happen?" Hermione asked.

"I think so too, dear," Minerva replied.

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds...twenty...ten...nine – maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him – three...two...one...

"That's my boy," James said proudly.

BOOM.

"What was that?" Sirius said, jumping.

"Keep interrupting and we'll never find out," Minerva said, annoyed.

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

"Who – who – who?"

“Sirius...you sound like an owl,” Harry stated, matter-of-factly.

“Right...Change of subject...So, Harry...why did you snicker when they mentioned Vernon’s sister?” Sirius asked.

Harry grinned. “She made the mistake of spending an entire night insulting Mum and Dad.”

James smiled evilly. “What did you do to her?”

“I might have accidentally blown her up like a balloon.”

The Marauders’ began to laugh.

“I am so proud of my son,” James stated to no one in particular.

25 points if you can tell me the name of the CHARACTER, not the actor, that played with a ball in the lobby of the hotel in ‘Somewhere In Time’.

Also: Hidden movie reference.

Do play the movie trivia challenge. Earn points for the house of your choice simply by leaving a review, and/or answering any of the trivia questions. Catch the hidden movie quotes for bonus points.

See my profile for details on the contest.

“Hurry up and start reading, McGee,” Fred said.

“Yeah, I want to find out who is knocking on the door,” George said.

Minerva stiffened. “If either of you boys EVER call me McGee again, I will give you both detention from now until the day Severus wears white robes. Are we CLEAR?”

“B-but...you let Sirius call you McGee, and besides, we’ve already left Hogwarts.” Fred and George were both pouting.

“Yes, well...you’re not Sirius; and you may have left school already, but you’re still only children in my time.” She smirked.

Sirius grinned. “Hey, Prongs. I told you Minnie had a crush on me.”

“I most certainly do NOT!” She sniffed angrily. “I’m going to start reading now.”

#### Chapter Four: The Keeper of the Keys

“Is it Hagrid?” Fred asked.

Harry looked incredulous.

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.

George said, “It’s got to be Hagrid.”

“Where’s the cannon?” he said stupidly.

“Just when I think that Muggles can’t be any more thick, they go and prove me wrong,” Draco muttered.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands – now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

“Who’s there?” he shouted. “I warn you – I’m armed!”

“Oh yeah, like that’s gonna work on Hagrid,” James said.

There was a pause. Then –

SMASH!

George said, “I still think it’s Hagrid.”

“Dear Merlin, WHY? What did I ever do to you?” Severus groaned, “I can’t believe that I’m going to have to put up with twin reincarnations of Black.”

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed on the floor.

“I agree with George...it’s Hagrid,” Fred said.

Harry snapped. “Of course it’s Hagrid! Who else would it be? The title of the chapter was The Keeper of the Keys!”

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

“HAGRID!!” Sirius yelled clapping his hands and bouncing up and down like a five year old.

“I’ve never seen a beetle glint...is that even possible?” Minerva asked.

Hermione looked thoughtful. “I don’t think so. I’m really not sure though.”

Harry and Ron stared at her in shock, mouths agape.

“What?!” she said. “I don’t know everything, you know.”

The giant

“Half-giant actually,” Harry said knowingly.

...squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

“Couldn’t make us a cup o’ tea, could yeh? It’s not been an easy journey....”

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

“Budge up, yeh great lump,” said the stranger.

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

“Pathetic! If he actually did want to hurt you, that wouldn’t protect you at all,” Draco said, as though Dudley was in the room.

“An’ here’s Harry!” said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled into a smile.

“Las’ time I saw you, you was only a baby,” said the giant.

“Does she have to keep reiterating the ‘giant’ part?” Hermione asked rhetorically.

Luna answered anyway. “Yes, she does. She probably did it because she wanted to emphasize how large Hagrid really is.”

Neville stared in awe. Luna had just said something intelligent that actually made sense.

“Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh’ve got yer mom’s eyes.”

“I get that all the time,” Harry said, groaning.

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

“I demand that you leave at once, sir!” he said.

Remus snorted. “Yeah, like that’s gonna work,” he muttered sarcastically.

“You are breaking and entering!”

Ginny smirked. “I don’t think he cares.”

“Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune,” said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gum out of Uncle Vernon’s hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made out rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

“Woah...” the twins said in awe.

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

Everyone snickered at this.

“Anyway – Harry,” said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, “a very happy birthday to yeh. Got sommat for yeh here – I mighta sat on it at some point, but it’ll taste all right.”

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.

“The first birthday cake I can ever remember having,” Harry whispered unintentionally.

Everyone looked a bit teary-eyed.

Draco realized something in that moment. "So that's why you risked expulsion to smuggle Hagrid's dragon out of the castle. He was the first person to treat you like you mattered."

Harry turned bright red.

"So there really was a dragon," Neville said, grinning in realization that Harry had not in fact gotten him a detention because of a prank.

That lightened the mood enough that Minerva felt she could continue.

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

The giant chuckled.

"True, I haven't introduced meself, Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.

"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind."

"Now that's just wishful thinking. The Dursleys would never fix a cup of tea for a wizard," Harry said.

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he's sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a



copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid...

“I wish I had some of that amber liquid,” Severus growled.

Another stress ball appeared.

“Is this someone’s idea of a sick joke?!”

...that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, “Don’t take anything he gives you, Dudley.”

The giant chuckled darkly.

“Yer great puddin’ of a son don’ need fattenin’ anymore, Dursley, don’ worry.”

“Go Hagrid!” James and Sirius yelled together.

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful,

“Next time I see Hagrid, I’m going to give him a big hug,” Lily said, smiling.

...but he still couldn’t take his eyes off the giant. Finally as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, “I’m sorry, but I still don’t really know who you are.”

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Call me Hagrid,” he said, “everyone does. An’ like I told yeh, I’m Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts – yeh’ll know all about Hogwarts, o’ course.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Remus muttered.

“Er – no,” said Harry.

“See...told you.”

Hagrid looked shocked.

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly.

“Sorry?” barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. “It’s them that should be sorry!

“You tell ‘em, Hagrid,” James said.

I knew yeh weren’t getting’ yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn’t even know about Hogwarts, fer cryin’ out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?”

“All what?” asked Harry.

“ALL WHAT?” Hagrid thundered. “Now wait jus’ one second!”

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

“Do you mean ter tell me,” he growled at the Dursleys, “that this boy – this boy! – knows nothin’ abou’ – about ANYTHING?”

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren’t bad.

“I know some things,” he said. “I can, you know, do math and stuff.”

But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, “About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents’ world.”

“What world?”

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

“Not a good look for Hagrid,” Fred said. George nodded in agreement, and a serious look was on both their faces.

“DURSLEY!” he boomed.

“Vernon’s in trouble...” Sirius sang cheerfully.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like “Mimblewimble.” Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

“But yeh must know about yer mom and dad,” he said. “I mean, they’re famous. You’re famous.”

“Unfortunately,” Harry muttered sulkily.

“What? My – my mom and dad weren’t famous, were they?”

“Yeh don’ know...yeh don’ know...” Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

“Yeh don’ know what yeh are?” he said finally.

Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.

“Stop!” he commanded. “Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!”

Ron snorted. “Yeah...that’ll work...Moron.”

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

“You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left for him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An’ you’ve kept it from him all these years?”

“Kept what from me?” said Harry eagerly.

“STOP! I FORBID YOU!” yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

“Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh,” said Hagrid.

“Good idea...please do...save us from this insanity.” The stress ball in Severus’ hand was getting quite the workout.

“Harry – yer a wizard.”

There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

“I’m a what?” gasped Harry.

“A wizard o’ course, said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which sank even lower, “an’ a thumpin’ good’un, I’d say, once yeh’ve been trained up a bit. With a mum an’ dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An’ I reckon it’s abou’ time yeh read yer letter.”

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green ink to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Questions exploded in Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse,

"I have no doubt that it was," Minerva commented idly.

...and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl – a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl – a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.

Hagrid

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm.

“Oh, that poor owl,” Luna murmured.

Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

“Where was I?” said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.

“He’s not going,” he said.

“Oh, yes, he is!” James and Lily said together, both glaring at the book.

Hagrid grunted.

“I’d like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him,” he said.

“A what?” said Harry, interested.

“A Muggle,” said Hagrid, “it’s what we call nonmagic folk like them. An’ it’s your bad luck you grew up in a family o’ the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on.”

“We swore when we took him in we’d put a stop to that rubbish,” said Uncle Vernon, “swore we’d stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!”

Fred and George look mutinously at Professor Dumbledore.

“I’m thinking...prank #112, subplot B.” One said to the other.

“We’ll need Ginny’s help for that one.”

“Do you honestly think that she’ll refuse?”

“Good point...Hey, Gin!”

“What, Gred?”

“We need your help with Operation Nemesis.”

“Oookaaay...Will this be a variation on a ‘Lookie-Loo’?”

“Naw...More of a variation on ‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’.”

“I see...Well...I’m in.”

“Are you quite finished,” Minerva asked, exasperated.

“Yes, ma’am,” they three chorused together.

“You knew?” said Harry. “You knew I’m a – a wizard?”

“Knew!” shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. “Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was?”

“Dratted sister...” Lily shrieked.

At the same moment, James yelled, “Being WHAT, exactly?”

It sounded rather like, “Drabettedingwhatsisexacsterly...”

Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that – that school – and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was – a freak!

“Okay...first of all...I came home with frog spawn in my pockets once, and that was because James put it there to gross me out when I pulled out my wand. That was also the summer after my first year. I

got permission to use magic at home for the one day, just so I could show my parents what magic can do. The cup into a rat spell was the first one that came to mind. And if I'm a freak, then Petunia is a slob...I feel better now. Please continue, Professor," Lily finished with a smile.

But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"

"Well, Petunia, I'm sorry you feel that way," Lily said sarcastically. "Yes, they paid a lot of attention to me during the holidays...you got them year round. Yes, they took me on shopping trips when I was home. I did grow during the school year, and I seem to recall you getting some pretty nice stuff on those trips as well. Any jealousy issues that you have with me, should not have been taken out on my son!"

"Well, I figured that she was jealous of you, but I kinda thought that she must have wanted to be a witch too, and that was the reason behind her jealousy," Harry said.

Lily smiled sadly. "That was probably also part of the problem. But it wasn't as if I had asked to be magical."

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been waiting to say all this for years.

"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just as strange, just as – as – abnormal – and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"

"Gee thanks, Petunia...I love you, too," Lily muttered under her breath.

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"

"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid,



“I almost pity those Muggles,” Minerva said.

Severus’ head snapped up. “Minerva!” he said reproachfully.

“Oh, Severus...Don’t look at me like that. I said almost!” She then continued reading.

...jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. “How could a car crash kill Lily an’ James Potter? It’s an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin’ his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!”

“But why? What happened?” Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid’s face. He looked suddenly anxious.

“I never expected this,” he said, in a low, worried voice. “I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble getting’ hold of yeh, how much yeh didn’t know. Ah, Harry, I don’ know if I’m the right person ter tell yeh – but someone’s gotta – yeh can’t go off ter Hogwarts not knowin’.”

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

“Well, it’s best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh – mind, I can’t tell yeh everythin’, it’s a great myst’ry, parts of it....”

The Marauders and Lily all leaned forward in eagerness to hear the grim truth.

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, “It begins, I suppose, with – with a person called – but it’s incredible yeh don’t know his name, everyone in our world knows –”

“Who?”

“Well – I don’ like sayin’ the name if I can help it. No one does.”

“Why not?”

“You know, I never understood the You-Know-Who business. Really, by doing that we’re just doing exactly what he wants...fearing him. If anything, we should call him Tom Riddle. Not scary at all, is it? That’s his real name,” Harry said, looking toward his parents.

“Riddle?” Draco asked. “But that’s not a wizarding name.”

“Ah,” Albus began, “That is because Riddle’s mother was a witch, but his father was a Muggle.”

“Wait! He’s for blood purity. That would mean that my father has been bowing and serving a half-blood.” Draco started laughing. “Oh, man...I love that irony.”

Everyone else, who knew the Malfoys began to laugh with him.

When everyone had calmed down, Minerva began to read.

“Gulpin’ gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went...bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was...”

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

“Could you write it down?” Harry suggested.

“Nah – can’t spell it. All right – Voldemort.” Hagrid shuddered. “Don’ make me say it again. Anyway, this – this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin’ fer followers. Got ’em, too – some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o’ his power, ’cause he was getting’ himself power, all right. Dar days, Harry. Didn’t know how ter trust, didn’t dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches...terrible things happened. He was takin’ over. ’Course, some stood up to him – an’ he killed ’em. Horribly. One o’ the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore’s the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn’t dare try takin’ the school, not jus’ then, anyway.

“Now, yer mum an’ dad were as good a witch an’ wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an’ girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the mystery is why You-Know-Who never tried to get ’em on his side before...probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin’ ter do with the Dark Side.

James tried to hold back his laughter, but it popped out of him despite his best efforts. “D-d-dar-rk Si-ide...”

Sirius started to snicker, as well. He turned to James. “Lu-uke...I am y-your fa-ha-ther.”

Hermione burst into laughter as well.

“What’s so funny about the Dark Side?” Neville asked confused.

“Many things,” Luna said dreamily.

“Nev, they are laughing because in the Star Wars movies, they talk about the Dark Side. And the dark lord of the series was referred to as Darth Vader. But he was really Anakin Skywalker, father of the hero of the movies, Luke....Although, I certainly hope that Voldemort isn’t my father,” Harry explained.

“I’d kill myself first,” Lily said, half serious.

“ Mybe he thought he could persuade ’em...maybe he just wanted ’em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an’ – an’ –”

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

“Sorry,” he said. “But it’s that sad – knew yer mum an’ dad, an’ nicer people yeh couldn’t find – anyway...”

“Wow, he really misses you guys,” Sirius said.

“You-Know-Who killed ’em. An’ then – an’ this is the real myst’ry of the thing – he tried to kill you, too.

Harry gave a humorless laugh. “Mystery? Riiiiight...Big Mystery!” He was starting a good rant now, glaring at the Headmaster all the while. “Oh yes, that mystery took away my parents...I was in our world for five bloody years, and – and that man,” he pointed at Dumbledore, “could have told me the whole damn time...But no...I’m kept in the dark, so that when good’ole Moldywarts decides to trick me into getting the damn mystery from the frickin’ Department of Mysteries...I fall for the damn trap! Because I didn’t know that it was a trap...a bloody trap...I went and got my godfather killed! He was just trying to protect me!”

He had jumped up and started pacing. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, Born as the seventh month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark the him as his equal, But he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.” He all but screamed the prophecy at Dumbledore, missing the looks of shock and fear on his friends’ faces.

The table, chairs and columns were starting to shake.

“You know what it means! I could have been training for the day when I have to kill or be killed...but NO! I am kept in the dark for years so I don’t know that I should be bloody-well hanging onto my teachers’ words like they could save my life – and apparently they bloody well could! If I had known...” He burst into tears, and everything stopped shaking.

Ginny approached him, and, as she wrapped her arms around him, he said, “If I had known, then Sirius wouldn’t have died...hell...Cedric might still be alive.” Minerva gasped; Cedric was the son of Aurora Diggory.

Harry continued to sob loudly into Ginny shoulder. “And you know what you said?” he asked Dumbledore rhetorically. “My damn power...the one that the Dark Bastard doesn’t know...it’s bloody love, something that I never even experienced until I was bloody twelve. And the only reason I experienced it then was because the twins and Ron rescued me from the summer of hell with my abusive family. They broke me out, and took me to the Burrow, where I finally got to know what a family really is. Molly Weasley was the first person to show me any real affection beyond friendliness...to her I am a son. And Ginny...she is the only girl who wants to be with Harry, not the bloody boy-who-lived.”

Albus Dumbledore was ashen faced. “I will try not to make the same mistakes this time around, my boy.”

Twenty minutes later, Ginny had calmed Harry down to the point where they could continue the story. She cast dark looks that boded ill toward anyone who dared attempt to ask Harry for more information.

Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin’ by then. But he couldn’t do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That’s what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh – took care of yer mum an’ dad an’ yer house, even – but it didn’t work on you, an’ that’s why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill ’em, no one except you, an’ he’d killed some o’ the witches an’ wizards of the age – the McKinnons,

Sirius whimpered. He was thinking about his current crush, Marlene.

...the Bones, the Prewetts – an’ you was only a baby, an’ you lived.”

Something very painful was going on in Harry’s mind. As Hagrid’s story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before – and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Everyone shuddered.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

“Took yeh from the ruined house myself on Dumbledore’s orders. Brought yeh ter this lot....”

“Load of old tosh,” said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have gained back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

“Now you listen here, boy,”

“His. Name. Is. Harry.” Sirius enunciated clearly. He was feeling even more protective toward his godson now that he knew he was going to die protecting him.

... he snarled, “I accept there’s something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating

People began jumping to their feet saying things like ‘How could you leave him there’ and ‘Hagrid had to have told you’ and ‘They beat him. You cannot place him there’.

Albus Dumbledore was doing something that no one would have believed possible before today. He was shrinking back in fear. And what’s worse, he was feeling ashamed of himself.

Two hours later, it was a very solemn group that sat back down at the table.

The Headmaster had been screamed at in twenty different languages including Gobbledegook (Remus), French (Hermione), Greek (Severus), Egyptian (the twins), and Romanian (Ginny, in a lot of colorful words that she learned from Charlie). He had had bat bogeys attacking him for twenty minutes before someone lifted the curse. Minerva had confiscated his wand, and his lemon drops. And he had been turned blue with green hair, orange nails, maroon robes (courtesy of Ron), and red eyes with purple pupils (the Weasley

twins). And lastly, and most distressingly (to him, at least) Minerva had told him that they were over.

Minerva began to read...

...wouldn't have cured – and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them

Sirius and Remus both growled in anger.

...in my opinion – asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types – just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end –”

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt up from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, “I'm warning you, Dursley – I'm warning you – one more word...”

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

“That's better,” said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

“But what happened to Vol-, sorry – I mean, You-Know-Who?”

“Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried to kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see...he was getting' more an' more powerful – why'd he go?”

“Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on side came back

ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was coming back.

“Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on – I dunno what it was, no one does – but somethin' about you stumped him, all right.”

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

Dumbledore had begun to look more and more uncomfortable during this last paragraph.

In fact, he looked so uncomfortable that he drew the attention of Fred and George.

“Dumbledore!” Fred snapped at him.

Albus flinched violently.

“Why exactly are you looking the way we did the time we turned Ron's teddy into a spider?” George asked.

Ron glared at his brothers.

The headmaster sighed. “I might have had a little something to do with the reason Harry didn't do anything to his family.”

Minerva put the book face down on the table. “Albus...What, pray tell, did you do?”



He whispered something that no one could hear.

“Do speak up, Alby...” George said.

“Indeed...I think we’d all like to hear this,” finished Fred.

He spoke softly, yet everyone was able to hear him. “I put a block on his powers, one that would come off when he comes of age. The fact that he is, even now, able to do accidental magic of the strength we witnessed earlier tells me that when it comes off, he will be more powerful than Merlin.”

Harry’s face turned white. “Take it off,” he said gruffly. “I want it off, now!”

“But...”

“No! Take it off, now, you meddling old man. Nothing gives you the right to treat people like pawns! I have no doubt that if you thought it was for the ‘greater good’ that I die, you’d murder me yourself!” Harry snapped.

Albus Dumbledore blushed. Everything Harry had said was true.

Minerva handed Albus his wand.

With a few words, the block was gone.

Harry gasped loudly as magic flooded throughout his body. After about fifteen minutes the feeling died down. Harry lifted his wand and yelled, “Expecto Patronum!” Prongs, Padfoot, and Moony all leapt from his wand. They were glowing gold instead of white.

“Whoa...” Harry muttered. “That’s new. It’s usually just Prongs, and it’s never been gold before.”

James stared at his son in awe. "Wait...I was your original Patronus...and three of the four Marauders are your new one?"

"Well, Yeah."

"Awesome...wait a sec...who taught you the Patronus charm...that's like...a WOMBAT level spell," James said.

"Moony taught me, 'cause dementors affect me a lot."

"I am so cool," Remus said, leaning back in his chair.

"I think I will continue reading now. There isn't much left to this chapter, and I could really use a cup of tea," Minerva said.

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it...every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry...chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach...dreading going back to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back...and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard – you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

“Who cares about fame? I just want to make people like Hagrid, McGonagall, and the Weasleys proud of me,” Harry said.

“Oh, Harry...Hagrid couldn't be more proud of you. He looks at you as though you were his nephew,” Hermione said reassuringly.

“Yeah, and Mum and Dad are real proud of you for always trying to do the right thing. You saved Ginny's life, and Dad's. Hell, they'll be thrilled that you and Ginny are a couple. It's all Mum ever wanted...you know...for you to officially be a Weasley,” Ron said.

“RON!” Ginny snapped. “We're not getting married.”

“Yet,” Harry said.

“Come again...” Ginny murmured.

“I said yet. If I survive the confrontation with the Dark Gourd, there is a ninety-nine percent chance we'll get married.”

“Oh,” she responded weakly.

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.

“Haven't I told you he's not going?” he hissed. “He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish – spell books and wands and –”

“If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him,” growled Hagrid. “Stop Lily an' James Potter's son going to Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had, Albus Dumbled –”

“It's nice to know that Hagrid thinks so well of me,” Albus said.

“Believe me, Headmaster...when Hagrid finds out what you did to Harry, you’ll be lucky if all of your limbs are attached to your body,” Luna said matter-of-factly. The tone of her voice, combined with her words, terrified the headmaster.

“I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!” yelled Uncle Vernon.

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head. “NEVER –” he thundered, “ – INSULT – ALBUS – DUMBLEDORE – IN – FRONT – OF – ME!”

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley – there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig’s tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

“That explains so much,” Fred said, a dreamy expression on his face.

“Ton-Tongue Toffee,” said George.

Ron was chuckling. “This Rowling person described it so much better than you did, Harry.”

Sirius and James simply exchanged looks of glee, and everyone else was hard-pressed to keep from laughing.

Well...

Except Draco, he was laughing harder than he ever had before. “Now that’s MY Patronus memory.”

Old rivalries fell at those words. Ron and Draco came to an unsaid but mutual agreement. They were both for Harry, and, by association, each other.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his pink umbrella and stroked his beard.

“Shouldn’ta lost me temper,” he said ruefully, “but it didn’t work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn’t much left ter do.”

Minerva smiled blissfully. “I’m going to buy Hagrid a vacation to the Romanian Dragon Reserves for that one.”

He cast a sideways glance at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

“Be grateful if yeh didn’t mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts,” he said. “I’m – er – not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin’. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an’ getyer letters to yeh an’ stuff – one o’ the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job –”

“Why aren’t you supposed to do magic?” asked Harry.

“Ooh, Harry, he’ll never answer that. We asked him many times but he wouldn’t tell us,” Remus said.

“I know the reason,” Harry stated.

“Why, then?” Lily asked.

“Tom Riddle was at school with him. And when the Chamber of Secrets was opened, and Myrtle died, Tom blamed Hagrid’s pet acromantula. Hagrid was expelled, and his wand snapped. When we proved that it wasn’t Hagrid, his record was cleared. He teaches Care of Magical Creatures now.”

“Wow,” Remus summed up the way the rest of them felt.

“Oh, well – I was at Hogwarts meself but I – er – got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an’

everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore.”

“Why were you expelled?”

“It’s getting’ late and we’ve got lots ter do tomorrow,” said Hagrid loudly. “Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an’ that.”

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

“You can kip under that,” he said. “Don’ mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o’ dormice in one o’ the pockets.”

“That coat has got to be the warmest thing I ever felt. It was perfect,” Harry said reminiscently.

“Tea, anyone,” Minerva asked, changing the subject. There were many ‘yes, please’s.

A tea service appeared, and Minerva served everyone but Albus. He was still in the doghouse.

During tea, the twins and Ginny held a conference. No doubt they were planning the aforementioned prank #112, subplot B; otherwise known as Operation Nemesis.

“Lily’s turn next,” James commented when everyone had satisfied their thirst and hunger. The peanut butter biscuits, that had been provided, were quite popular.

“Fine...Fine,” Lily said. She cleared her throat and began to read in a soft melodious voice, that Harry vaguely could remember hearing sing to him.

Trivia Question: What actor was in both Star Wars and Harry Potter?

Twenty Points to the ones who answer correctly.

So far Hufflepuff is in the lead.

## Chapter Five: Diagon Alley

“Hooray! I love Diagon Alley,” Sirius said.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Merlin, spare me...I’m begging you.”

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

“It was a dream,” he told himself firmly. “I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I’ll be at home in my cupboard.”

“Nope...it was real,” Remus said.

“Moony, it will take forever to finish this chapter if you and Siri insist on commentating,” James said.

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there’s Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn’t open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“All right,” Harry mumbled, “I’m getting up.”

He sat up and Hagrid’s coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper clutched in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him. He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the paper on top of Hagrid, who didn’t wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid’s coat.

“Don’t do that.”

“Never tell a news owl that. It’ll just make them really mad,” Harry said, shuddering. “Bloody scary, they are.”

“Do you mean to tell me, that the boy-who-faced-the-dark-lord-and-lived is scared of a news owl?” Severus asked.

“Yep, that about sums it up.”

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

“Hagrid!” said Harry loudly. “There’s an owl –”

“Pay him,” Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

“What?”

“He wants payin’ fer deliverin’ the paper. Look in the pockets.”

Hagrid’s coat seemed to be made of nothing but pockets – bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags...finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

“Give him five Knuts,” said Hagrid sleepily.

“Knuts?”

“Money, Potter, it’s money,” Draco muttered.

Harry groaned. “How many times do I have to tell you...I. Grew. Up. With. Muggles.”

“Oh, yeah...sorry.”

“The little bronze ones.”



Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. The he flew off threw the open window.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

“Best be off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an’ buy all yer stuff fer school.”

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

“Um – Hagrid?”

“Mm?” said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

“I haven’t got any money – and you heard Uncle Vernon last night...he won’t pay for me to go and learn magic.”

“Are you kidding me?” Draco said. “The Potters are...like...like...ten times richer than my family.”

“They. Are. What?” Harry said low and dangerously. He glared at the Headmaster. “It would seem that someone has been keeping secrets from me...and I don’t like it.”

“Erm...We’re also the only living descendents of Godric Gryffindor,” James said, blushing slightly at the looks he was getting from Lily and Hermione. “Did Dumbledore tell you nothing about our family?”

“Not a word,” Harry said.

“Why didn’t you look up your family in the library?” Lily asked. “They have information on all the old family trees in there.”

Hermione looked annoyed. “Not anymore they don’t. Madam Pince told me that Dumbledore removed them all during the summer before we started school.”

“Oy...twins!” Harry snapped. “How about we put my investment to good use when we get home, eh?”

“Absolutely,” George responded.

“Shall we continue,” Lily said, not wanting an answer.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Hagrid, standing up and scratching his head. “D’yeh think yer parents didn’t leave yeh anything?”

“But if their house was destroyed –”

“They didn’t keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards’ bank. Have a sausage, they’re not bad cold – an’ I wouldn’ say no teh a bit o’ yer birthday cake, neither.”

“Wizards have banks?”

“Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins.”

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

“Goblins?”

“Yeah – so yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it, I’ll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want to keep safe – ‘cept maybe Hogwarts. As a matter o’ fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway. Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business.” Hagrid drew himself up proudly. “He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin’ you – getting’ things from Gringotts – knows he can trust me, see.

“Yeah, and what was that, anyway...some sort of test! Yeah, lets bring an object that could give someone immortality into a school! Just to tempt old Voldie into coming to get it! Just so we can test whether or not good ole Harry, the one destined to kill or be killed by Voldie, is gonna turn dark and join him instead! Brilliant plan,

Headmaster...then again, all your plans regarding my life go off without a hitch don't they?" Harry yelled, lightning flashing from the ceiling, and wind whipping around him.

He took several deep breaths, trying to calm down. Slowly the storm dissipated.

"Damn accidental magic," he muttered. "Mum, please continue reading before I change my mind and decide to become a murderer here and now."

"Okay."

"Got everythin'? Come on, then."

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight. The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

"How did you get here?" Harry asked, looking around for another boat.

"Flew," said Hagrid.

"Flew?"

"Yeah – but we'll go back in this. Not s'posed ter use magic now I've got yeh."

They settled down into the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

"You know...I can't imagine it either. It would be like watching Sirius ride a broom the size of a toothpick," Remus said.

Sirius glared at his friend. "Are calling me fat?"

"Er...no – no, I'm not." Remus turned to Harry and whispered, "Sirius is dealing with PMS."

Harry barely held in a snicker. "Seeing as Sirius isn't a girl...What does PMS stand for?"

"Pre-madness Syndrome."

"I don't think there's any 'pre-' about it," Harry said, staring at Sirius who had conjured a hand mirror so he could see his reflection as he made faces.

Remus turned to see what Sirius was doing, and said, "Good point, Harry."

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter – er – speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the battered pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells – enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the high security vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way – Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London see. Deep under the Underground. Yeh'd die of hunger tryin' ter get out, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

"This said on the morning of the day when Gringotts was broken into and the criminal escaped," Harry muttered. "Oh, the irony."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the Daily Prophet. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this, but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

“Oh, Harry, Hagrid won’t mind if you interrupt him to ask questions,” James said, shaking his head.

“Ministry o’ Magic messin’ things up as usual,” Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

“There’s a Ministry of Magic?” Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

“’ Course,” said Hagrid. “They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, o’ course, but he’d never leave Hogwarts, so old Cornelius Fudge got the job. Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every morning, askin’ fer advice.”

“Cornelius Fudge! Is Minister of Magic?” Remus said his eyes wide. “Next thing you know, they’ll tell us that Gilderoy Lockhart, the homework stealing bastard, decided to become a teacher!”

“I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, Remus, but Gilderoy Lockhart taught us Defense in second year. Of course, at the end of the year he tried to Oblivate us using a broken wand, and it backfired onto him. He now lives in the Dai Llewellyn ward of St. Mungos,” Harry said, smirking.

“As scary as the idea of him being a teacher is, I think it’s worth it if he’s going to end up Obliviating himself,” Sirius said.

Lily rolled her eyes. “As fascinating as this all is...I’m going to start reading now. At this rate we’ll still be stuck here when I give birth to Harry!”

Harry shuddered.

“But what does a Minister of Magic do?”

“Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there’s still witched an’ wizards up an’ down the country.”

“Why?”

“Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone’d be wantin’ magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we’re best left alone.”

At this moment, the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clamored up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn’t blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, “See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?”

Lily groaned. “Could Dumbledore have possibly chosen anyone more likely to inform the Muggle world about us?”

“He could’ve chosen Xeno Lovegood,” Neville said.

“Yes, daddy is very obvious isn’t he? He always wants to wear a dress when we go to Muggle London. People always stare at him,” Luna said in a dreamy voice, yet proving once again that she was in Ravenclaw for a reason.

“Hagrid,” said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, “did you say there are dragons at Gringotts?”

“Well, so they say,” said Hagrid. “Crikey, I’d like a dragon.”

“You’d like one?”

“Wanted one ever since I was a kid – here we go.”

“Dragon,” Ron groaned. “Damn Hagrid and his unnatural affection for dangerous creatures.”

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes' time. Hagrid who didn't understand "Muggle money," as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two whole seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

"I still have no idea what that was."

"Still got yer letter, Harry?" he asked as he counted stitches.

Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

"Good," said Hagrid. "There's a list of everything yeh need."

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn't noticed the night before, and read:

## HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

### UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

### COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) By Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

#### OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter standard size 2)

1 set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope

1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT  
ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS

“I hate that rule about brooms. Why can't they bring their own?”  
James commented idly.

Dumbledore replied, “That rule was made so that all students, Muggle  
and Pure-blood will be on equal footing.”



“Dumbledore, that will never happen. Muggle-born students will not be on equal footing with Pure-bloods because Muggle-borns are told nothing about the magical world before they get to Hogwarts. If you really want Muggle-borns to be equal to Pure-bloods, then have a summer orientation program for them. You know, so they can learn the basic laws, the kinds of jobs in this world, the different types of beings (Centaur, Goblins, House Elves, etc.), and other things like that,” Hermione said, her eyes sparkling as she had another light-bulb moment. “You could also have orientation for Pure-bloods, to tell them about the differences and similarities between Muggles and Magical beings. Arthur Weasley would be happy to help with that, and it would probably prevent a lot of students from buying into the anti-Muggle mindset.”

“That is what we have Muggle Studies for,” Dumbledore said, seeming to blow off her ideas.

Minerva glared at him. “I think it’s a grand idea. After all, children of Death Eaters, never sign up for Muggle Studies, and if the orientation is mandatory, they’ll have to learn about them. I’m going to take it to the Board of Governors. Hermione, can you write down your ideas for me?”

“I’d be happy to, Professor...Lily, you can start reading again while I’m writing.”

“Can we buy all this in London?” Harry wondered aloud.

“If yeh know where to go,” said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the train too slow.

“I don’t know how the Muggles manage without magic,” he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

“What’s an escalator?” Draco asked.

To everyone’s surprise, it was Snape who answered. “An escalator is the Muggle version of the stairs to Dumbledore’s office.”

“They have a Muggle version?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes! Muggles are not cavemen, you know!” Hermione snapped.

“No I don’t know! My father won’t let me visit the Muggle world remember!”

“Oh...right...sorry...Hopefully they’ll start the orientation, and you can learn about it then. We’ll also plan on a trip to the Muggle world with you.”

“Thanks,” Draco muttered, blushing slightly. “Let’s just get on with the chapter.”

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed book shops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it could sell you a magic wand. This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke that the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn’t known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn’t help trusting him.

“That’s right, Harry! Trust Hagrid,” James said, grinning.

“This is it,” said Hagrid, coming to a halt, “the Leaky Cauldron. It’s a famous place.”

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn’t pointed it out, Harry wouldn’t have even noticed it was there. The people hurrying by

didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it.

"Of course only you and Hagrid can see it. There's a Muggle repelling charm on it," Hermione said, knowingly.

Before he could mention this, Hagrid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut. The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, "The usual, Hagrid?"

"Can't, Tom, I'm on Hogwarts business," said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry's shoulder and making Harry's knees buckle.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this – can this be –?"

"Oh, Merlin, no...Why me? I hate being famous!" Harry couldn't help groaning. Ginny rubbed his arm soothingly.

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter...what an honor."

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

Harry didn't know what to say. Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand – I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can't tell you, Diggle's the name, Dedalus Diggle."

"I've seen you before!" said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle's top hat fell off in his excitement. "You bowed to me once in a shop."

"He remembers!" cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!"

Harry shook hands again and again – Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

"By the time we made it to the entrance to Diagon Alley, I thought my hand was gonna fall off."

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

Harry growled.

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p-pleased I am to meet you."

“What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?”

“D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts,” muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he’d rather not think about it. “N-Not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?” He laughed nervously. “You’ll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I’ve g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself.” He looked terrified at the very thought.

But the others wouldn’t let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

“Must get on – lots ter buy. Come on, Harry.”

Doris Crockford shook Harry’s hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

“Told yeh, didn’t I? Told yeh you was famous. Even Professor Quirrell was tremblin’ ter meet yeh – min you, he’s usually tremblin’.”

“Is he always that nervous?”

“Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was studyin’ outta books but then he took a year off ter get some firsthand experience....They say he met vampires in the Black Forest, and then there was a nasty bit o’ trouble with a hag – never been the same since. Scared of his students, scared of his own subject

“That’s a load of horse manure,” Hermione said.

...– now, where’s me umbrella?”

Vampires? Hags? Harry’s head was swimming. Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

“Three up...two across...” he muttered. “Right, stand back, Harry.”

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered – it wriggled – in the middle, a small black hole appeared – it grew wider and wider – a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley!” James and Sirius yelled.

“Welcome,” said Hagrid, “to Diagon Alley.”

Lily glared at James. “You read over my shoulder, didn’t you, James?”

“No, I’m a seer.”

“James Harrison Potter!”

James flinched. “You sound just like my mother!” Lily raised her hand to smack him upside his head. “Alright – Alright, I confess...I read over your shoulder, and I’m very, very sorry.”

“You better be! You know how much I hate it when people do that.” She turned back to the book.

He grinned at Harry’s amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. Cauldrons – All Sizes – Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver – Self-Stirring – Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

“Yeah, you’ll be needin’ one,” said Hagrid, “but we gotta get yer money first.”

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles and ounce, they're mad...."

"They are mad," Lily said, "Right now it's only seven Sickles an ounce."

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium – Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand – fastest ever –"

"Sirius..."

"I know, Prongs...I know."

"Dad, Sirius, just wait until you hear about the Firebolt, it puts the Nimbus line to shame."

Two whimpers were the only response he got from the two slack-jawed teens.

There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of rat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon....

"Gringotts," said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was –

“Yeah, that’s a goblin,” said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

Fred and George said the poem in time with Lily. It was their second favorite part about going to the bank. Their absolute favorite was, of course, the cart ride.

“Like I said, yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it,” said Hagrid.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

“Morning,” said Hagrid to a free goblin. “We’ve come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter’s safe.”



“You have his key, sir?”

“Got it here somewhere,” said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblin’s book of numbers. The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of rubies as big as glowing coals.

Harry spoke up then, “Just so everyone knows. Never put anything onto a goblin’s ledger. They will probably begin planning your murder if you do.”

“Got it,” said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

“That seems to be in order.”

“An’ I’ve also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore,” said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. “It’s about the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen.”

“What! What is the You-Know-What?” Sirius practically screamed.

“The Philosopher’s Stone...” Harry, Ron and Hermione said as one, in bored tones.

The goblin read the letter carefully.

“Very well,” he said, handing it back to Hagrid, “I will have someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!”

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the doors leading off the hall.

“What’s the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen?” Harry asked.

“The Philosopher’s Stone...” Sirius said mimicking Harry and his friends.

“Shut it, Padfoot, or I’ll give you a flea bath,” Harry said.

“Why would Sirius need a flea bath?” Minerva asked. “You were speaking hypothetically when you talked about having an animagus form correct!?”

“Of course, McGee. I did take the revealing potion, but I haven’t attempted to transform yet.”

“You’d better not have, because if I found out that you did!” Her voice was very shrill by this time. “You would find yourself locked in a kennel from now until the day Severus gets a girlfriend.”

“You would really lock me up forever.” He pouted in a way that made Hermione and Luna sigh, much to Ron and Fred’s chagrin.

“Yes!”

Severus’ stress ball exploded. “Just what is that supposed to mean?” he snapped angrily.

“It means that no one thinks that you’re capable of getting a girlfriend,” George said matter-of-factly.

“Actually,” Draco began, “My great-aunt Elladora has always had a crush on Uncle Severus.”

“She’s the fat one right...with...with...the mustache?” Severus questioned, his face green.

“Yes, that’s Aunt Elladora.”

“You’re right, Minerva...I’m never getting a girlfriend.”

“Can’t tell yeh that,” said Hagrid mysteriously. “Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore’s trusted me. More’n my jobs worth ter tell yeh that.”

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had expected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches. It sloped steeply downward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them. They climbed in – Hagrid with some difficulty – and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible. The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn’t steering.

Harry’s eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late – they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

“I never know,” Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, “what’s the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?”

“A stalactite hangs tight to the ceiling,” Lily told Harry.

“I know that now!”

“Stalagmite’s got an ‘m’ in it,” said Hagrid. “An’ don’ ask me questions just now, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

He did look very green, and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

“Harry?”

“Yes, Ron?”

“Sometimes...like right now...I hate you.”

“I know Ron...I know.”

“Two and a half words,” Hermione said. “Tri-Wizard Tournament!”

“Point taken,” Ron said.

“Sorry, Harry.”

“No problem, Ron. I’m used to it by now.”

“All yours,” smiled Hagrid.

All Harry’s – it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn’t have known about this or they’d have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

“The gold ones are Galleons,” he explained. “Seventeen silver Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it’s easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o’ terms, we’ll keep the rest safe fer yeh.” He turned to Griphook. “Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?”

“One speed only,” said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed. The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners. The went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the

side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Hagrid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

“Stand back,” said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers and it simply melted away.

“If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they’d be sucked through the door and trapped in there,” said Griphook.

“Wicked,” the twins breathed.

“How often do you check to see if anyone’s inside?” Harry asked.

“About once every ten years,” said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

“Awesome,” they again breathed.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least – but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

“The Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Shut up, Sirius!” Ginny snapped. She liked Sirius as an adult, but as a teen, he was just plain old annoying.

“Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don’t talk to me on the way back, it’s best if I keep me mouth shut,” said Hagrid.

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn’t know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn’t have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than even Dudley had ever had.

“Might as well get yer uniform,” said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions.

Draco moaned. “Oh, no!”

“Oh, yes,” Harry said.

“Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts.” He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin’s shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

“Hogwarts, dear?” she said, when Harry started to speak. “Got the lot here – another young man being fitted up just now, in fact.”

“No, no, no, no...Make it stop...please, make it stop!” Draco continued to moan, as he rocked back and forth in his seat, an embarrassed look on his face. “Let me just announce, here and now, that I...was an ass when I was eleven.”

“Too right,” Harry said

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

“Hello,” said the boy, “Hogwarts, too?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“My father’s next door buying my books and mother’s up the street looking at wands,” said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. “Then I’m going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don’t see why first years can’t have their own. I think I’ll bully father into getting me one and I’ll smuggle it in somehow.”

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

“NO!”

“I’m sorry, Draco, but as you said, ‘you were an ass when you were eleven’,” Harry told the blond haired boy.

“Have you got your own broom?” the boy went on.

“No,” said Harry.

“Play Quidditch at all?”

“No,” Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

“The best sport in the world!” James and Sirius said.

They were about to explain the game to Harry, when he interrupted. “I play Quidditch. I know the game now!”

“I do – Father says it’s a crime if I’m not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you’ll be in yet?”

“No,” said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

“Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I’ll be in Slytherin, all our family have been – imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?”

“Cedric was a Hufflepuff, and he was the coolest seventeen-year-old I ever met...sorry guys,” Harry said the last bit to the twins.

“None taken...Cedric was right cool, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Hermione said dreamily.

Ron looked at her as though he had never seen her before.

“Mmm,” said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

“Thanks a lot, Potter,” Draco said grumpily.

“Your welcome.” Harry really wasn’t bothered by Draco.

“I say, look at that man!” said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing at two large ice creams to show he couldn’t come in.

“Aaawwww,” Lily said. He bought my baby an ice cream.

“Mum, I was eleven, not one. I was not a baby.”

“You’ll always be my baby.”

Harry turned crimson.

“That’s Hagrid,” said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn’t, “He works at Hogwarts.”

“Oh,” said the boy, “I’ve heard of him. He’s a sort of servant, isn’t he?”

“He’s the gamekeeper,” said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

Draco flinched.

“Yes, exactly. I heard he’s a sort of savage – lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed.”

“I think he’s brilliant,” said Harry coldly.

“Do you?” said the boy, with a slight sneer. “Why is he with you? Where are your parents?”



“Sorry, Potter.”

“No problem, Draco.”

“They’re dead,” said Harry shortly. He didn’t feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

“Oh, sorry,” said the other, not sounding sorry at all. “But they were our kind, weren’t they?”

Draco cringed again.

“They were a witch and wizard, if that’s what you mean.”

“I really don’t think they should let the other sort in, do you? They’re just not the same, they’ve never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What’s your surname, anyway?”

“I was just repeating what I grew up hearing. I really don’t think that way.”

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, “That’s you done, my dear,” and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

“Well, I’ll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose,” said the drawling boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had brought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

“Yum,” Sirius said.

A bowl of ice-cream appeared in front of him.

He dug in, and the way he ate made Ron look like he’d been to finishing school.

“What’s up?” said Hagrid.

“Nothing,” Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, “Hagrid, what’s Quidditch?”

“Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin’ how little yeh know – not knowin’ about Quidditch!”

“Don’t make me feel worse,” said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pale boy in Madam Malkin’s.

“– and he said people from Muggle families shouldn’t even be allowed in –”

“Yer not from a Muggle family. If he’d known who yeh were – he’s grown up knowin’ yer name if his parents are wizardin’ folk. You saw what everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o’ the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in ’em in a long line o’ Muggles – look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!”

“Too right,” Lily muttered.

“So what is Quidditch?”

“It’s our sport. Wizard sport. It’s like – like soccer in the Muggle world – everyone follows Quidditch – played up in the air on broomsticks and there’s four balls – sorta hard ter explain the rules.”

“And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?”

“School houses. There’s four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o’ duffers, but –”

“I bet I’m in Hufflepuff,” said Harry gloomily.

“You know...sometimes I really do wish that I was in Hufflepuff,” Harry commented.

Ron stared incredulously.

“Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin,” said Hagrid darkly. “There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one.”

“Actually,” Luna said, “there are more Ravenclaws who turned dark, than there are Slytherins.”

Everyone except Albus and Minerva stared at her in shock.

“Vol-, sorry – You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?”

“Years an’ years ago,” said Hagrid.

They bought Harry’s school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from Curses and Counter-curses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

“I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley.”

“Go Harry!” four boys yelled, leaping out of their seats. Yes, that’s right; it was James, Sirius, Fred, and George.

“I’m not sayin’ that’s not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances,” said Hagrid. “An’ anyway, yeh couldn’ work any of them curses yet, yeh’ll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level.”

“I’m at that level now,” Harry said, an evil grin spreading across his face.

Hagrid wouldn’t let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either (“It says pewter on yer list”), but they got a nice set of scales for weighing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell,

“You know...If Snape weren’t such an evil git toward me, then Potions would be my favorite subject,” Harry commented.

Ron stared at Harry. “You are not normal.”

“You’re right, I’m not normal. I wish I were.”

Ron decided that he would live longer if he kept his mouth shut.

...a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic potion ingredients for Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and miniscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry’s list again.

“Just yer wand left – oh, yeah, an’ I still haven’t got yeh a birthday present.”

Harry felt himself go red.

“You don’t have to –”

“Oh, Harry...” Hermione said, a pitying look on her face.

“I know I don’t have to. Tell yeh what, I’ll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh’d be laughed – an’ I don’t like cats, they make me sneeze. I’ll get yer an owl. All the kids want owls, they’re dead useful, carry yer mail an’ everythin’.”

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn’t stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

“Ah, Hedwig...my only friend in the prison that I call Privet Drive.”

The twins exchanged looks. George bent over his notebook. “‘Operation Bird Excrement’ right Gred.”

“Right, Forge.”

“Don’ mention it,” said Hagrid gruffly. “Don’ expect you’ve had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now – only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand.”

A magic wand...this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single spindly chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

“Good Afternoon,” said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

“Hello,” said Harry awkwardly.

“Ah, yes,” said the man. “Yes, yes. I thought I’d be seeing you soon. Harry Potter.” It wasn’t a question. “You have your mother’s eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work.”

“Yes, it is,” Lily commented.

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

“Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration.

“Yep,” James said, caressing his...wait, that would just sound disgusting. I’m not going to go there, lest one of my brothers read this and tease me mercilessly for it.

Well, I say your father favored it – it’s really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course.

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

“And that’s where...”

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry’s forehead with a long, white finger.

“I’m sorry to say I sold the wand that did it,” he said softly. “Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands...well, if I’d known what that wand was going out into the world to do....”

He shook his head and then, to Harry’s relief, spotted Hagrid.

“Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again....Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn’t it?”

“It was, sir, yes,” said Hagrid.

“Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?” said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

“Er – yes, they did, yes,” said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. “I’ve still got the pieces, though,” he added brightly.

“But you don’t use them?” said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

“Oh, no, sir,” said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

“Gee, I wonder why,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

“Hmmm,” said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. “Well, now – Mr. Potter. Let me see.” He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. “Which is your wand arm?”

“Er – well, I’m right-handed,” said Harry.

“Hold out your arm. That’s it.” He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, “Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or

phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

"That explains a lot," Neville muttered. "I have to use my dad's wand."

"Why..." James began, but changed his mind, "I don't think I really want to know the answer."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try –"

Harry tried – but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no – here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here, somewhere – I wonder, now – yes, why not – unusual combination – holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."



Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Hagrid whooped and clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well...how curious...how very curious..."

"What's curious?" Draco asked, looking around at everyone in confusion.

Lily ignored him.

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious...curious..."

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather – just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother – why, its brother gave you that scar."

Draco paled. "That is bloody scary."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember....I think we must expect great thing from you, Mr. Potter....After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things – terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap. Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Hagrid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bite to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

"You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet," said Hagrid.

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life – and yet – he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

"I always wanted to try a hamburger."

"When we take you to Muggle London, I'll buy you one," Hermione said, smiling at her ex-enemy.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander...but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened when Vol-, sorry – I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. Just be yerself. I know

it's hard. Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts – I did – still do, 'smatter of fact."

"When people aren't trying to do me in, I have a smashing time at Hogwarts. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a quiet life." Harry sighed deeply

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts," he said, "First o' September – King's Cross – it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me....See yeh soon, Harry."

The train pulled out of the station, Harry wanted to watch Hagrid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

Sorry it took so long to update. I'll try to be quicker in the future.

I need more prank ideas, and names for them. Points will be given based on how good the ideas are, and whether or not I use them.

“Here, James,” Lily said, handing him the book, “it’s your turn to read now.”

James deepened his voice and began to read...

## Chapter Six: The Journey From Platform Nine And Three-Quarters

Harry’s last month with the Dursleys wasn’t fun. True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn’t stay in the same room,

Fred and George snickered.

...while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn’t shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him – in fact, they didn’t speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did become a little depressing after a while.

“But it was still an improvement over the way they normally treated me,” Harry said.

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company. He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in A History of Magic. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the window as she pleased. It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn’t come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice.

“You got that right, Fred?” George asked.

“Got it!” Fred said triumphantly. “Dead mice...Wouldn’t rats work better though?”

“Yeah, they carry diseases and stuff.”

Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, counting down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day, so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

"Er – Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"Er – I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to – to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

"Wow...Dursley is real intelligent...D'ya think he'll upgrade to actual words anytime soon?" asked Remus snidely.

"Thank you."

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

"He's real smart, too," Draco said to Remus. "If he's trying to make fun of Harry, then he's doing a fabulous job of it. Of course hundreds of students can fit on one magic carpet! Idiot!"

Harry didn't say anything.

"Where is this school anyway?"

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

“I forgot to ask Hagrid,” Harry said.

“I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o’clock,” he read.

His aunt and uncle stared.

“Platform what?”

“Nine and three-quarters.”

“Don’t talk rubbish,” said Uncle Vernon. “There is no platform nine and three-quarters.”

“Yes, there is, and Petunia knows it, too. She’s been there at least five times,” Lily said.

“Yeah, the last time she was there, she threw a tantrum because she had to walk through a wall,” Severus commented.

Sirius paled. “I remember that. She was right scary. Kept yelling things about us being demons from hell.”

“It’s on my ticket.”

“Barking,” said Uncle Vernon, “howling mad, the lot of them. You’ll see. You jut wait. All right, we’ll take you to King’s Cross. We’re going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn’t bother.”

“Why are you going to London?” Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

“Taking Dudley to the hospital,” growled Uncle Vernon. “Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings.”

Everyone burst into laughter.

“I bet the doctors never forgot that surgery,” Hermione said.

Lily smiled at her. “Yeah, I’ve heard of some kids being born with an extension of their tailbone, but never of one that looked like a pig’s tail. Dudley must have made the papers.”

Both girls snickered.

Harry woke at five o’clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep.

“Aaaww...That is so cute,” Lily said, teasing her son.

Harry’s face turned pink. “Mu-um,” he moaned. He wasn’t really upset though. It was just nice to be able to know his parents, their personalities, mannerisms, and the way they interacted with other people (especially each other).

He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn’t want to walk into the station in his wizard’s robes – he’d change on the train. He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up. Two hours later, Harry’s huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys’ car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry, and they had set off.

They reached King’s Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry’s trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

“Uh-oh,” Sirius said. “That sounds like my Mum when she has something particularly nasty planned for me.”

“Well, there you are boy. Platform nine – platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don’t seem to have built it yet, do they?”

He was quite right, of course. There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and in the middle, nothing at all.

“Have a good term,” said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing. Harry’s mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do? He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He’d have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard,

“Bad idea, Harry,” Remus moaned. “The guard will think that you’re nuts.”

“No joke,” Harry said sarcastically.

...but didn’t dare mention platform nine and three-quarters. The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn’t even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stupid on purpose. Getting desperate, Harry asked for the train that left at eleven o’clock, but the guard said there wasn’t one. In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic.

Sirius was trying not to panic, as well.

According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hogwarts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the middle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

“You know, Harry,” George said.

“I seem to recall...” (Fred)

“That you couldn’t lift it at all.” (George)



Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platform nine and ten.

"No!" Remus shouted.

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"– packed with Muggles, of course –"

"Yeah!" shouted Sirius excitedly, as he bounced up and down, clapping like a child.

Everyone but Luna stared at him nervously. Luna was humming something that sounded suspiciously like 'Weasley is Our King'.

Harry swung round. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair. Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him – and they had an owl.

"Oy..." Ron snapped, "What do they mean 'plump'?"

"Your mother is plump, Weasley," Draco said.

Neville stared at the blond. "Malfoy...You have a death wish, don't you."

"Huh?"

"You just insulted Mrs. Weasley, and in front of three of her sons and her daughter, who just so happens to be better with a wand than any of her brothers."

The three Weasley boys all nodded solemnly at this little fact. Ginny just smirked and pointed her wand at the Slytherin. A moment later, Draco was sporting donkey ears and a tail.

“You’re an ass, Malfoy,” was all she said.

The Marauders couldn’t help it. They had to laugh.

At last, James calmed down enough to start reading again.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were saying.

“Now, what’s the platform number?” said the boys’ mother.

“Nine and three-quarters!” piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, “Mom, can’t I go...”

“You were so cute, Ginny,” Harry said.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Aw, Harry thinks that ickle Gin-gin was cute,” Ron teased

“Bite me,” she snapped, not appreciating being teased.

“You’re not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet. All right, Percy, you go first.”

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it – but just as the boy reached the platforms, a large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

“Fred, you go next,” the plump woman said.

“I’m not Fred, I’m George,” said the boy. “Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? Can’t you tell I’m George?”

“Sorry, George, dear.”

“Only joking, I am Fred,” said the boy, and off he went.

“You guys are so awesome,” Sirius said.

“Thanks,” they chimed.

His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, because a second later, he had gone – but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier – he was almost there – and then, quite suddenly, he wasn’t anywhere.

There was nothing else for it.

“Excuse me,” Harry said to the plump woman.

“Again with the ‘plump’,” Ron muttered

“Hello, dear,” she said. “First time at Hogwarts? Ron’s new, too.”

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

“Hey! I resent that!” Ron snapped.

“No, Ron. You resemble that.” Harry couldn’t help himself. The Marauder in him had wanted to burst out for a while now.

“Yes,” said Harry. “The thing is – the thing is, I don’t know how to –”

“How to get onto the platform?” she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

“Not to worry,” she said. “All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don’t stop, and don’t be scared you’ll crash into it, that’s very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you’re nervous. Go on, go now before Ron.”

“Er – okay,” said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble – leaning forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run – the barrier was coming nearer and nearer – he wouldn't be able to stop – the cart was out of control – he was a foot away – he closed his eyes ready for the crash –

It didn't come...he kept on running...he opened his eyes.

A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it. He had done it.

“Well, what did you expect?” Draco muttered.

“Draco, you really are thick. Harry grew up with Muggles. He is not used to magic, therefore he was expecting to crash into the barrier,” Hermione explained.

“Oh, right.” The blond turned pink, which contrasted humorously with his grey ears and tail.

“Incidentally, Draco, your old house elf, Dobby, closed the barrier in second year, so I really did crash once.”

“Wait, Dobby? You freed him didn't you? Lucius was furious about that.”

“Yes, Draco, I did. On a total side note...Ron kept teasing me about Colin Creevey wanting to start the 'Harry Potter Fan Club', but I think Dobby may have beaten him to it,” Harry said blushing.

“He (Dobby) did,” Ginny said matter-of-factly.

Harry groaned.

James grinned. “All right! My son has a fan club! He definitely takes after me.”

“Actually, Dad, from what I understand, you wanted a fan club; I don’t.”

James cringed. “Right then...Moving on...”

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were all ready packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, “Gran, I’ve lost my toad again.”

“Oh, Neville,” he heard the old woman sigh.

“Trevor is a real artist when it comes to escaping. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that Trevor can pick locks. I padlocked his cage once, and he still escaped,” Neville said.

Harry, Ron and Hermione had helped him look for Trevor at various times, and rarely found him. He did seem to come back on his own though.

Harry realized this, and decided to mention it to him. “Hey, Nev, maybe Trevor needs freedom to move about the castle at will. He is smart if he can escape a locked cage, and he does always come back to you eventually. It’s just a thought.”

“That’s a good idea. Trevor seems to enjoy visiting Ravenclaw Tower; in fact, he has a relationship with my roommate’s toad,” Luna said.

“Trevor visits your dormitory?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, yes, once a week at least. Nikki, that’s Meghan’s toad, really enjoys his company. They spend hours croaking to each other.”

Neville had an epiphany. “That’s why he keeps escaping his cage. He has a girlfriend. I can’t believe he got one before I did.”

Luna smiled dreamily. “Actually, Meghan has quite a crush on you.”

“Wait...you mean Meghan, the gorgeous brunette with the glasses that you sit with at meals, that Meghan?” he asked.

“That’s her. She is my only friend in Ravenclaw.”

The others all felt bad for her. They knew she had a rough time there.

Well, the others except for Neville, he was grinning goofily. He had a bit of a crush on Meghan ever since he started tutoring her in Herbology, it just wasn’t her subject.

After a moment, James decided to continue with the story.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

“Give us a look, Lee, go on.”

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

“Oy, Fred, what ever happened to Clicky?”

“You don’t remember? He got into a box of nosebleed nougats before we had created the cure. He died a lonely death.”

“Oh yeah...Lee made us go to his funeral and everything.”

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

“That really hurt.”

“Want a hand?” It was one of the red-headed twins he’d followed through the barrier.

“Yes, please,” Harry panted.

“Oy, Fred! C’mere and help!”

With the twins’ help, Harry’s trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

“Thanks,” said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

“Yeah, thanks again for that, by the way. The trunk was just way too heavy for me to lift.”

“No problem,” they said as one.

Harry couldn’t figure out how they did that. ‘They must be telepathic’ he thought.

“What’s that?” said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry’s lightning scar.

“Blimey,” said the other twin. “Are you -?”

“He is,” said the first twin. “Aren’t you?” he added to Harry.

“What?” said Harry.

“Harry Potter,” chorused the twins.

“Oh, him,” said Harry. “I mean, yes, I am.”

“Real intelligent, Harry,” James commented.

“Hey! In my defense, I still wasn’t used to being famous. Come to that, I don’t think I ever will get used to it.”

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train’s open door.

“Fred? George? Are you there?”

“Coming, Mom.”

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying. Their mother had just taken out her handkerchief.

“You were watching us?” Ron asked.

Harry sighed. “I had never seen how a proper family acts toward each other, so forgive me for being curious.”

“Ron, you’ve got something on your nose.”

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

“Mom – geroff.” He wriggled free.

“Aaah, had ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?” said one of the twins.



The Marauders snickered. The twins stood up and gave a bow.

“Shut up,” said Ron.

“Where’s Percy?” said there mother.

“He’s coming now.”

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny silver badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

Harry and Ron groaned.

“Ah Percy,” said one twin.

“The perfect prat,” said the other.

“Can’t stay long, Mother,” he said. “I’m up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves –”

“Oh, are you a prefect, Percy?” said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. “You should have said something, we had no idea.”

“Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it,” said the other twin. “Once –”

“Or twice –”

“A minute –”

“All summer –”

“Oh, shut up,” said Percy the Prefect.

“Ah, that was a good one,” Fred said grinning.

“How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?” said one of the twins.

“Because he’s a prefect,” their mother said fondly. “All right, dear, well, have a good term – send me an owl when you get there.”

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

“Now, you two – this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you’ve – you’ve blown up a toilet or –”

“Brilliant,” said Sirius.

“Blown up a toilet? We’ve never blown up a toilet.”

“Great idea though, thanks, Mom.”

“Since you guys never did it, I did,” Ginny said.

“You blew up that toilet when Bletchley was on it!” the twins said incredulously.

“Yeah...He was in Hospital wing for a week, and they replaced him with Crabbe for the game against Ravenclaw. They were slaughtered,” Ginny said grinning.

Draco paled. “That was you? That was your revenge?”

“Revenge for what?” Ron asked dangerously.

“For him trying to force himself on me.”

Harry growled.

“Don’t worry, Harry. I got him good. I kneed him and ran, and then I made sure that he would never feel UP to attempting it with me or anyone else ever again.”

All the boys winced. Then looked at the petite red-head in awe. She was brilliant

“It’s not funny. And look after Ron.”

“Don’t worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us.”

“Shut up,” said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins all ready and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

“Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we met on the train?”

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn’t see him looking.

“That was a bit awkward. Hearing what you were thinking, like that. Of course, by that time, I couldn’t stop listening even though I wanted to.”

“You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?”

“Who?”

“Harry Potter!”

Harry heard the little girl’s voice.

“Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, oh please....”

“Oh, Merlin save me,” Ginny said, burying her face in her hands as she turned as red as her hair.

“You’ve already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn’t something you goggle at in a zoo. Is he really, Fred? How do you know?”

“Asked him. Saw his scar. It’s really there – like lightning.”

“Poor dear – no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform.”

“Yeah, you were. You make us look bad. Can I help cook dinner, Mrs. Weasley? Oh, no, I’ll help de-gnome the garden; I enjoy it. Yes, Mrs. Weasley, I packed earlier today; I’ll just go help Ron, shall I?” Fred imitated.

Harry blushed. “Hey! I like cooking, it’s relaxing. And de-gnoming is fun; we always have a competition on who can toss the gnomes the farthest.”

Ron interrupted here. “Yeah, you’ve been winning since you first visited us the summer after first year.”

Harry ignored him. “And of course I packed the night before. Hermione would slaughter me if I hadn’t. And by helping Ron, he was ready to go in time so we wouldn’t miss the train.”

Lily smiled happily. Even though she wouldn’t live to see him grow up, at least she knew he’d grow up to be fine young man.

“Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?”

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

“I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No don’t you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day of school.”

“Thank-you, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry murmured.

“All right, keep your hair on.”

A whistle sounded.

“Hurry up!” their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

“Don’t, Ginny, we’ll send you loads of owls.”

“We’ll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat.”

“By the way, you forgot to send me one.”

“George!”

“Only joking, Mom.”

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys’ mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn’t know what he was going to – but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

James and Lily glared at Dumbledore, who had wisely kept silent for a while.

The door of the compartment slid open and the youngest red-headed boy came in.

“Anyone sitting there?” he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry.  
“Everywhere else is full.”

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn’t looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

“You saw that?” Ron’s neck was red.

“Er...yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, Ron.”

The twins were back.

“Listen, we’re going down the middle of the train – Lee Jordan’s got a giant tarantula down there.”

“Ah, Clicky, our noble friend...You will be missed,” George said, his hand covering his heart.

“You didn’t even remember what happened to him. How can you miss him?” Harry muttered.

“No comment.”

“Right,” mumbled Ron.

“Harry,” said the other twin, “did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley. And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then.”

“Bye,” said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

“Are you really Harry Potter?” Ron blurted out.

Everyone stared at Ron.

Harry nodded.

“Oh – well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George’s jokes,” said Ron. “And have you really got – you know...”

He pointed at Harry’s forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

“So that’s where You-Know-Who -?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I can’t remember it.”

“Nothing?” said Ron eagerly.

“Well – I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t ‘til I met a dementor in my third year that I remembered more.”

“Wow,” said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

“Are all your family wizards?” asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

“That’s the truth.”

“Er – yes, I think so,” said Ron. “I think Mom’s got a second cousin who’s an accountant, but we never talk about him.”

“And why not?” Lily asked.

“He doesn’t much like us. He doesn’t like it that Mum got magic, and he’s a squib. She used to be really close to him, but now he hates her. And talking about it upsets her,” Ron said.

“Oh...”

“So you must know loads of magic already.”

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

“No, they weren’t,” Draco muttered.

Ron glared at him.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“I heard you went to live with Muggles,” said Ron. “What are they like?”

“Horrible – well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I’d had three wizard brothers.”

“Five,” said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. “I’m the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I’ve got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left – Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy’s a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they’re really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it’s no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I’ve got Bill’s old robes, Charlie’s old wand, and Percy’s old rat.”

“Oy, Ron,” George said.

“Yeah, you never told us that.” Fred was staring at Ron.

“What’s the big deal?” Ron asked, not looking at anyone.

“The big deal is that you, Ron are a prefect, best friend of Harry Potter,” Ginny began, but Draco interrupted her.

“You are one third of what the Hufflepuffs call the Golden Trio. You’re a better Keeper than Wood, who plays professionally. And you have parents who would be proud of you even if all you do with your life is raise goats,” he finished vehemently.

Ron looked sheepish.

After an awkward moment Draco nodded at James to continue.

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat grey rat, which was asleep.



“Rat!” Ron snapped, glaring at the book.

“His name’s Scabbers and he’s useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect, but they couldn’t aff – I mean, I got Scabbers instead.”

Ron’s ears went pink. He seemed to think he’d said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Harry didn’t think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he’d never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley’s old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

“Sorry, Harry. I shouldn’t have felt happier just because your home life was terrible.”

“...and until Hagrid told me, I didn’t know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort –”

Ron gasped.

“What?” said Harry.

“ You said You-Know-Who’s name!” said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. “I’d have thought you, of all people –”

“Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself,” Dumbledore said.

He really shouldn’t have said anything to draw attention to himself, it just made people glare at him.

“I’m not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name,” said Harry, “I just never knew you shouldn’t. See what I mean? I’ve got loads to learn....I bet,” he added, voicing for the first time something that had been worrying him a lot lately, “I bet I’m the worst in the class.”

“Hey! You’re our kid...You’ll do great!” James said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, Harry! Especially in defense,” George said, brotherly pride coloring his voice.

“What do you mean?” Remus asked.

Hermione grinned. “Harry’s the best in the school at Defense, probably better than Dumbledore himself. Because our teacher this year was only teaching theory, we started a secret defense club. Harry taught us, and when we were ambushed by Death Eaters, we escaped with only a few injuries, and all the Death Eaters but one were captured.”

Everyone who hadn’t been there for the battle was in shock.

“Wow,” James said. “Um...Wow!” He stared at his son for several long moments until...

“Can we just finish the chapter already?” Harry snapped, getting annoyed by all the staring.

“Err, Right,” James muttered.

“You won’t be. There’s loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough.”

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, “Anything off the cart, dears?”

Harry, who hadn’t had any breakfast, leapt to his feet, but Ron’s ears went pink again and he muttered that he’d brought sandwiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

“You didn’t have breakfast?” Hermione said in shock.

“Hermione, at the Dursleys, I was lucky to get one meal a day.”

Everyone glared at Dumbledore...again.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry – but the woman didn’t have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not wanting to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

“Pumpkin Pasties are my favorites,” Harry said.

Lily grinned. “Mine too.”

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

“Hungry, are you?”

“Starving,” said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, “She always forgets I don’t like corned beef.”

“Swap you for one of these,” said Harry, holding up a pasty. “Go on —”

“Aww,” Lily said.

“You don’t want this, it’s all dry,” said Ron. “She hasn’t got much time,” he added quickly, “you know, with five of us.”

“Go on, have a pasty,” said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry’s pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay forgotten).

“What are these?” Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. “They’re not really frogs, are they?” He was starting to feel that nothing would surprise him.

The Marauders laughed at Harry.

“Hey! I grew up in the Muggle world. It said frogs, so I wanted to know if they were real.”

“No,” said Ron. “But see what the card is. I’m missing Agrippa.”

“I have one.”

Ron stared at Sirius in awe...and whimpered.

“What?”

“Oh, of course, you wouldn’t know – Chocolate Frogs have cards inside them, you know, to collect – famous witches and wizards. I’ve got about five hundred, but I haven’t got Agrippa or Ptolemy.”

“Got him too.”

More whimpers.

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man’s face. He wore half-moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache. Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

“So this is Dumbledore!” said Harry.

“Don’t tell me you’d never heard of Dumbledore!” said Ron. “Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa – thanks –”

Harry turned over his card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

“ ‘Greatest wizard’ my arse.” Minerva glared at her boyfriend.

Harry turned the card back over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore’s face had disappeared.

“He’s gone!”

“Well, you can’t expect him to hang around all day,” said Ron. “He’ll be back. No, I’ve got Morgana again and I’ve got about six of her...do you want it? You can start collecting.”

Ron’s eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

“Help yourself,” said Harry. “But in, you know, the Muggle world people just stay put in photos.”

“Do they? What, they don’t move at all?” Ron sounded amazed. “Weird!”

“Really weird,” Malfoy said, his eyes wide.

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the

frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep eyes off of them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they mean every flavor – you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and marmalade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

George shuddered in remembrance. "I did."

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh – see? Sprouts."

"I like sprouts," Luna said.

Draco grinned at her. "Hey, me too." Maybe marriage to her wouldn't be so bad after all. He'd certainly never be bored.

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and three-quarters came in. He looked tearful.

Neville blushed.

“Sorry,” he said, “but have you seen a toad at all?”

When they shook their heads, he wailed, “I’ve lost him! He keeps getting away from me!”

“He’ll turn up,” said Harry.

“He always does,” Harry said.

“Yes,” said the boy miserably. “Well, if you see him...”

He left.

“Don’t know why he’s so bothered,” said Ron. “If I’d brought a toad I’d lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can’t talk.”

Neville glared at Ron.

“Hey...I got my comeuppance,” Ron muttered.

The rat in question was still snoozing on Ron’s lap.

“He might have died and you wouldn’t know the difference,” said Ron in disgust. “I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn’t work. I’ll show you, look...”

“I wish he had died,” Ron said.

“Yeah, but then we’d never know the truth,” said Hermione.

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

“Unicorn hair’s nearly poking out. Anyway –”

He had just raised his wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him. She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

“Has anyone seen a toad? Neville’s lost one,” she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

Hermione groaned.

“We’ve already told him we haven’t seen it,” said Ron, but the girl wasn’t listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

“Oh, are you doing magic? Let’s see it, then.”

She groaned again.

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

“Er – all right.”

He cleared his throat.

“Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat, rat yellow.”

Remus laughed. “That’s not a spell.”

“I know that now.”

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

“Are you sure that’s a real spell?” said the girl. “Well, it’s not very good, is it? I’ve tried a few simple spells just for practice and it’s all worked for me. Nobody in my family’s magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it’s the very best school of witchcraft there is, I’ve heard – I’ve learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough – I’m Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?”



The Marauders and Lily stared at Hermione in shock.

“What?” she said. “Harry did it too, you know.”

Everyone stared at Harry.

“Okay...So I acted like an ‘average’ student to keep people from expecting too much. What’s the big deal?” Harry turned red. “The only reason that everyone knows how good I am in Defense is ‘cause I liked Remus and didn’t want to disappoint him when he taught me. Besides I needed to learn the Patronus Charm.”

“What do you mean, when I taught you?”

“You were the best defense professor we ever had. Third year,” Harry said grinning in remembrance.

“Cool!” James and Sirius said.

She said this all very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn’t learned all the course books by heart either.

“Rowling got that wrong,” Harry muttered.

“I’m Ron Weasley,” Ron muttered.

“Harry Potter,” said Harry.

“Are you really?” said Hermione. “I know all about you, of course – I got a few extra books for background reading, and you’re in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.”

Harry groaned.

“Am I?” said Harry, feeling dazed.

“Goodness, didn’t you know, I’d have found out everything I could if it was me,” said Hermione. “Do either of you know what house you’ll be in? I’ve been asking around, and I hope I’m in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad....Anyway, we’d better go and look for Neville’s toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we’ll be there soon.”

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

“Whatever house I’m in, I hope she’s not in it,” said Ron. He threw his wand back into his trunk. “Stupid spell – George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud.”

“Sorry, Hermione.”

“No problem, Ron.”

“Sorry, Ron.”

“No problem, George.”

“What house are your brothers in?” asked Harry.

“Gryffindor,” said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. “Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don’t know what they’ll say if I’m not. I don’t suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin.”

Fred and George laughed. There was no way Ron could ever be a Slytherin.

“That’s the house Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who was in?”

“Yeah,” said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking depressed.

“You know, I think the ends of Scabbers whiskers are a bit lighter,” said Harry, trying to take Ron’s mind off houses. “So what do your oldest brothers do now they’ve left, anyway?”

“Speaking of,” Harry began, “I’ve been thinking...I’m gonna take Newts for Runes and Arithmancy when we go home. I don’t want to work for the Ministry the way it is. I’m gonna try to be a Curse Breaker like Bill. At least until I’m thirty-five-ish. Then I want to teach Defense.”

“You’ll do great as a Curse Breaker,” Ginny said smiling.

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he’d finished school.

“Charlie’s in Romania studying dragons, and Bill’s in Africa doing something for Gringotts,” said Ron. “Did you hear about Gringotts? It’s been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don’t suppose you get that with the Muggles – someone tried to rod a high security vault.”

Harry stared.

“Really? What happened to them?”

“Nothing, that’s why it’s such big news. They haven’t been caught. My dad says it must’ve been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don’t think they took anything, that’s what’s odd. ’Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who’s behind it.”

“Well, gee, maybe he was,” Hermione said sarcastically.

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You-Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying “Voldemort” without worrying.

“I am more comfortable saying it.”

“What’s your Quidditch team?” Ron asked.

“Er – I don’t know any,” Harry confessed.

“Now it’s Puddlemere United.”

James grinned. “Good taste in teams.”

“Yeah and it doesn’t hurt that my old team captain is their reserve Keeper. If I wanted to play Quidditch, Oliver would beg them to let me play. I only ever lost one game, and that was ‘cause of the dementors.”

The Marauders looked at him in awe.

“What!” Ron looked dumbfounded. “Oh, you wait, it’s the best game in the world –” And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he’d been to with his brothers and the broomstick he’d like to get if he had the money. He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn’t Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was the pale boy from Madam Malkin’s robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he’d shown back in Diagon Alley.

Draco groaned. “Once again...I was an ass.”

Ginny snickered. “You still are one.”

He had forgotten about the fancy transfiguration that she had done.

“Is it true?” he said. “They’re saying all down the train that Harry Potter’s in this compartment. So it’s you, is it?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

“Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle,” said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. “And my name’s Malfoy, Draco Malfoy.”

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigger. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

“Think my name’s funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford.”

Ginny flicked her wand and gave Malfoy the hooves to go with his ears and tail.

He turned back to Harry. “You’ll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there.”

He held out his hand to shake Harry’s, but Harry didn’t take it.

“I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks,” he said coolly.

“Thanks for that, Potter. You made me start second guessing my Dad,” Draco said seriously.

“You’re welcome, I guess.”

Draco Malfoy didn’t go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

“I’d be careful if I were you, Potter,” he said slowly. “Unless you’re a bit politer you’ll go the same way as your parents. They didn’t know what was good for them either. You hang around with riff-raff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it’ll rub off on you.”

“I was an ass,” Draco said again

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

“Say that again,” Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

“Oh, you’re going to fight us, are you?” Malfoy sneered.

“Unless you get out now,” said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

“But we don’t feel like leaving, do we, boys? We’ve eaten all our food and you still seem to have some.”

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron – Ron leapt forward, but before he’d so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle’s knuckle – Crabbe and Malfoy backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scabbers finally flew off and hit the window, all three of them disappeared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they’d heard footsteps, because a second later, Hermione Granger had come in.

“What has been going on?” she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

“I think he’s been knocked out,” Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. “No – I don’t believe it – he’s gone back to sleep.”

And so he had.

“You’ve met Malfoy before?”

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

“I’ve heard of his family,” said Ron darkly. “They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they’d been bewitched. My dad doesn’t believe it. He says Malfoy’s

father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side." He turned to Hermione. "Can we help you with something?"

"Yeah, just so ya'll know. My dad was lying. He always was loyal to You-Know-Who."

"You'd better hurry up and put your robes on, I've just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we're nearly there. You haven't been fighting, have you? You'll be in trouble before we even get there!"

"Scabbers has been fighting, not us," said Ron, scowling at her. "Would you mind leaving while we change?"

"All right – I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childish, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice. "And you've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

"Sniffy," Hermione said, "is that even a word?"

"Nope," said Remus.

"Didn't think so."

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron's were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers underneath them.

"I can't help it that I'm tall for my age."

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

"Hagrid!" the Golden Trio cried out.

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me – any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Ooooooh!"

"I remember my first sighting. It was, pardon the pun, magical," Lily said.

Hermione and Harry nodded in understanding. They knew what that moment felt like, more so than the others because they were raised as Muggles.

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.



“No more’n four to a boat!” Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione.

“Everyone in?” shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. “Right then – FORWARD!”

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

“Heads down!” yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

“Oy, you there! Is this your toad?” said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

“Trevor!” Neville cried out.

“Trevor!” cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands.

Everyone laughed. Neville hadn’t changed much in the past five years...well he was a lot more confident now.

Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid’s lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door.

“Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?”

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

“That’s my turn done,” James said. His voice cracked slightly.

“My turn!” Sirius cried out.

“That sounds ominous,” Minerva muttered.

Severus groaned. “I’m going to need more Firewhiskey.”

A pot of coffee appeared.

“I guess I’ll have to make do with this.”

“Pour me a cup, would you, Sev?” Lily asked. Sirius was very immature, and she needed something to get her through the next chapter.

10 Points: If you can give the scientific name for the tailbone.

That's just cause I think that the education system is the worst it's ever been. I think that anyone who can name it deserves the points.

Don't forget to let me know what house you're in.

## Chapter Seven: The Sorting Hat

Harry's face paled. "Uh-oh..." he whispered.

Unfortunately for him, Remus heard him.

"What do you mean 'uh-oh'?"

"Erm..." Harry was blushing now. "You'll see." He had suddenly remembered what the hat had said to him. 'You would do well in Slytherin.' He knew full well how Sirius felt about Slytherins, and James felt the same way, according to Sirius.

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"No she's not," all six pranksters said.

Minerva looked quite smug.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it.

"But why would you want to?" Sirius asked in confusion.

Lily groaned. "It was just a description, Sirius."

"Hey...you called me Sirius."

Lily paled a little. "Black...I meant Black."

"Sure you did," he said smugly.

The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right – the rest of the school must already be here – but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

“We did the same thing, remember, Sev?” Lily asked.

“Erm, yeah...that was the reason,” he said blushing.

“No!” Harry yelled. He suddenly realized why Snape had only ever insulted his father, not his mother.

“Huh?” James said, confused.

“You had a crush on my mother?” Harry asked Snape.

“Hey,” Severus said. “In my defense, I was only eleven, and she was the first friend I ever had.”

“Eeww!” James and Harry cried out together.

Lily stared at her friend. “Severus...I never knew that.”

“Yes, well...you weren’t supposed to know about it.” He then said something that he never thought he would. “Please continue reading, Black.”

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall. “The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes

with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

“The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each house has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

“The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting.”

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville’s cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron’s smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

Ron and Neville both blushed.

“Harry, you’ll never be able to flatten your hair. It’s just like mine,” James said.

“Yeah, Dad, I know.”

“I shall return when we are ready for you,” said Professor McGonagall. “Please wait quietly.”

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

“How exactly do they sort us into houses?” he asked Ron.

“Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking.”

“Brilliant joke, Fred. Real funny,” Ron said.

Fred turned pink. "Sorry, Ron," he said, but he wasn't looking at Ron when he said it. He was looking at Hermione, who was glaring at him. It was a cruel joke to play on someone who was already nervous about the Sorting.

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet – what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need.

Hermione groaned.

Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He's never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teacher's wig blue.

"All right, Harry!" James said.

"It was accidental magic, and it may sound cool, but the punishment made it decidedly uncool," Harry said.

"What did they do?" Lily asked.

Harry stared straight ahead, avoiding looking directly at anyone. "I was locked in my cupboard for one week straight with no food or water. The only reason I survived was because of my magic. No one but a wizard could survive that long without water."

Dumbledore shrank in his seat.

He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

"A little melodramatic there, Potter," Draco said, smirking.

“You’re an ass, Malfoy,” Harry responded, but there was no venom in his voice.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air – several people behind him screamed.

“What the -?”

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying, “Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance –”

“My dear Friar, haven’t we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he’s not really even a ghost – I say, what are you all doing here?”

“Peeves is actually really cool,” Harry said. “He actually listened to you guys,” he said to the twins, “when you told him to give Umbridge hell. Some of the things he pulled were simply brilliant.”

Fred and George grinned at each other.

“We have done the impossible!” they declared. “A poltergeist actually listened to a human!”

George continued, “Gred, I think we deserve an Order of Merlin.”

“Right you are, Forge, right you are.”

Hermione smirked. “You’ll not get an Order of Merlin for it...but,” she said, pulling her wand and conjuring two gold medals, “I’ll give you each Medals of Marauding.”

She handed them the medals, which held images of three animals. She left the rat off, because, really, no one from the future wanted to be reminded of him.

Meanwhile, the three Marauders were beaming with pride as the twins pinned their medals onto their robes.

Fred knelt before Hermione. "My Lady, whatever thou dost require, I beseech thee, to ask of me what thy will. I live to serve thee, Oh Lady of Wit and Charm. I am but thy humble servant." He kissed the back of her right hand, causing her to blush.

"Good Sir, thou dost flatter me with thy praise. I ask naught of thee, but this – that thou wouldst only use thy powers for good not evil, that thou wouldst slaughter mine enemies on thy altar of good humor." Hermione said all this in a slightly haughty tone while looking down her nose at Fred who was grinning madly.

He responded, "Thy wish shall be granted, My Lady." He stood, and bowed to her. They both returned to their seats as Sirius continued.

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

"Nearly-Headless Nick!" everyone cried out at once.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.



“Now, form a line,” Professor McGonagall told the first years, “and follow me.”

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, “It’s bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*.”

“As often as you quote that book, Hermione, I think that Ron and I both have it memorized,” Harry commented.

“Well, as often as I had to quote it, that isn’t surprising. I think I’m going to buy you your own copy to go with the floss as your birthday present,” Hermione said.

“If you do, then I will read it.”

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn’t simply open on to the heavens.

“That was very poetic sounding,” Lily murmured.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the

stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn't have let in the house.

"George."

"Fred."

The twins exchanged glances before Fred turned to his notebook to write something down.

Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it, Harry thought wildly, that seemed the sort of thing

The Marauders stared at Harry.

"Muggles!" Harry snapped yet again.

– noticing that everybody was staring at the hat, he stared at it, too. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth – and the hat began to sing.

And so did Sirius...

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindor's apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuffs are true

And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

If you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,

Those cunning folk use any means

To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

Sirius finished with a shout.

The whole hall burst into applause

As did Fred and George.

as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Fred snickered.

Hermione glared at him.

He stopped laughing immediately and turned to Ron, "Sorry 'bout that, Ron."

"No problem."

Hermione looked smug.

Harry smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather a lot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

“Don’t worry, Harry, I felt the same way,” Remus said sympathetically.

“Thanks, Moony,” Harry said, not realizing that he had just used the Marauders’ name for Remus

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

“When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted,” she said. “Abbott, Hannah!”

“She’s cute,” Draco said. “Blaise has a crush on her.”

“She’s a Hufflepuff,” Neville said in shock. “No Slytherins fall for Hufflepuffs.”

“Actually, Neville,” Harry began, “Nymphadora Tonks’ mother was a Slytherin and her father was a Hufflepuff.”

“Wait – wait – wait,” Sirius said. “Are you talking about Andromeda’s daughter, my cousin.”

“Yes.”

“Cool! So what’s she like now that she’s all grown up?”

Hermione snickered. “She’s in love with Remus.”

Remus turned bright red.

She continued, “He loves her too.”

Sirius suddenly jumped up – causing Remus to cower a little in fear – and said, “Yahoo – Remy’s in love!”

Remus relaxed. “Just finish the chapter, Padfoot.”

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moment's pause –

“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

“Bones, Susan!”

“My mother was a Bones,” James commented.

Harry stared at him in shock.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

“Boot, Terry!”

“He asked me out last month,” Hermione said idly.

“What?!” Fred and Ron shouted together.

“I said no,” she told the two of them. “He’s not my type.”

“What is your type,” Fred asked.

She blushed. “That is none of your business, Fred Weasley!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravensclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

“Brocklehurst, Mandy” went to Ravenclaw too, but “Brown, Lavender” became the first new Gryffindor, and the table on the far

left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling.

"We were just cheering because she was in Gryffindor, not because we found her attractive or anything," George said hurriedly.

"Bulstrode, Millicent" then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry's imagination, after all he'd heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot.

"They are," Draco said. "Especially her." He shuddered. "She is terrifying when she's mad."

He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen; not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

James and Sirius growled.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

"Prat!" Harry and Ron said as one.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus," the sandy haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione almost ran to the stool, and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

Hermione blushed.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

“Sorry,” Ron said looking at Hermione in terror.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he'd better get back on the train?

“That would never happen,” James said.

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool.

Neville blushed.

The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted, “GRYFFINDOR,” Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to “MacDougal, Morag.”

His blush got worse.

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed, “SLYTHERIN!”

Draco glared at the Gryffindors. “There's nothing wrong with being in Slytherin!”

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

“I was.”

There weren't many people left now.

“Moon”..., “Nott”..., “Parkinson”..., then a pair of twin girls, “Patil” and “Patil”..., then “Perks, Sally-Anne”..., and then, at last –



“Potter, Harry!”

“Yeah!” James and Sirius shouted.

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

“Potter, did she say?”

“The Harry Potter?”

Harry groaned.

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

“Hmm,” said a small voice in his ear. “Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There’s talent, oh my goodness, yes – and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that’s interesting....So where shall I put you?”

“Not happening, not happening. No, no, no, no, no...” Harry was rocking back-and-forth.

Ginny rubbed his arm soothingly.

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, Not Slytherin.

“Not Slytherin, eh?” said the small voice. “Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that – no? Well, if you’re sure – better be GRYFFINDOR!”

“WHAT?!”

This surprisingly came from Malfoy.

“You could have been in Slytherin?”

“That’s what the hat said,” Harry said snidely.

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, “We got Potter! We got Potter!” Harry sat down opposite the ghost in the ruff he’d seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he’d just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

“Ghosts will do that,” Sirius said matter-of-factly.

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry recognized him at once from the card he’d gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train. Dumbledore’s silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts.

“My beard does not!” Dumbledore said, but he really shouldn’t have opened his mouth.

“Yes, it does!” everyone snapped, glaring at him.

Harry spotted Professor Quirrell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

Harry shuddered, earning himself some strange looks from the professors.

And now there were only three people left to be sorted. “Thomas, Dean,” a black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. “Turpin, Lisa,” became a Ravenclaw and then it was

Ron's turn. He was pale green by now. Harry crossed his fingers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," said Percy Weasley pompously

"Git!" Fred said.

...across Harry as "Zabini, Blaise," was made a Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

"Nothing could please me more," Albus said, earning more glares, and a smack upside his head from Minerva.

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he – a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Sirius looked up. "You were right, Fred, this Percy fellow is a git if he thinks that Dumbledore is the best wizard in the world."

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now filled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry,

"Rowling got that wrong as well," Harry commented.

Sirius growled, and began muttering under his breath. "Die, die, die..."

It wasn't until Lily threatened to turn him into a eunuch that he stopped muttering and continued to read.

...but he'd never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if it made him sick. Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and begun to eat. It was all delicious.

"That does look good," said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak.

"Can't you -?"

"I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"I know who you are!" said Ron suddenly. "My brothers told me about you – you're Nearly-Headless Nick!"

“I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy –” the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

“Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?”

“You really shouldn’t have said that,” James said.

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn’t going at all the way he wanted.

“Like this,” he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, “So – new Gryffindors! I hope you’re going to help us win the house championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row!

“Six years in a row!” the Marauders yelled.

“That’s terrible,” Remus said.

The Bloody Baron’s becoming almost unbearable – he’s the Slytherin ghost.”

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn’t look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

Harry snickered at the look on Draco’s face.

“How did he get covered in blood?” asked Seamus with great interest.

“I’ve never asked,” said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

“I did.” Draco said, “He murdered the woman he loved. It’s her blood on him. He killed himself immediately after though. He says that it’s his penance to have her blood covering him for all eternity.”

Lily shuddered.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding...

As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

“My favorite,” Harry and James said at the same time.

“I’m half-and-half,” said Seamus. “Me dad’s a Muggle. Mom didn’t tell him she was a witch ‘til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him.”

Fred and George snickered.

The others laughed.

“What about you, Neville?” said Ron.

“Well, my gran brought me up and she’s a witch,” said Neville, “but the family thought I was all-Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me – he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned – but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced – all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here – they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad.”

“That’s terrible...the way they treated you, Neville,” Lily said. “Why did you grow up with your Gran and not your parents?”

Neville paled slightly, making Lily wish that she hadn’t asked. “My parents were tortured to insanity by the Lestranges. They are in St. Mungos for the rest of their lives.”

The Marauders and Lily winced.

On Harry’s other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talking about lessons (“I do hope they start right away, there’s so much to learn, I’m particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it’s supposed to be very difficult –”; “You’ll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing –”).

“The lesson plan hasn’t changed much, then,” Remus asked Hermione.

“Not much at all.”

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

“I take offense to the greasy and sallow comments,” Snape said.

“Why? It’s true,” Sirius said bluntly.

Severus made a rude gesture.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell’s turban straight into Harry’s eyes – and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry’s forehead.

“Weird,” James said.

“Ouch!” Harry clapped a hand to his head.

“What is it?” asked Percy/

“N-nothing.”

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling that he didn’t like Harry at all.

“I probably didn’t like you. If I hadn’t heard about your childhood then I would probably hate you right now,” Severus said.

“Good to know,” Harry muttered.

“Who’s that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?” he asked Percy.

“Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he’s looking so nervous, that’s Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn’t want to – everyone knows he’s after Quirrell’s job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape.”

Severus smirked.

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn’t look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

“Ahem – just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

“First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.”

Dumbledore’s twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.



Fred and George stood up and bowed to applause.

“He looks at us at the beginning of every year,” Sirius said. “It’s good to know that after the halls of Hogwarts no longer echo the laughter from our pranks, that there will be those who follow in our footsteps down the noble road of marauding.”

“I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

“Quidditch trials will be held the second week in of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

“And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a most painful death.”

James and Remus exchanged glances. That was not normal for Dumbledore.

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

“He’s not serious?” he muttered to Percy.

“Must be,” said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. “It’s odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we’re not aloud to go somewhere – the forest’s full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least.”

“Yeah, he should have,” Remus muttered.

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!” cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers’ smiles had become rather fixed.

Harry and Hermione groaned.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

“Everyone pick their favorite tune,” said Dumbledore, “and off we go!”

And the school bellowed:

As did the Marauders, the twins, and Ginny.

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they’re bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we’ve forgot,

Just do your best, we’ll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.”

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march.

Sirius burst out laughing and said, “I applaud thee.”

Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

“Ah, music,” he said, wiping his eyes. “A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!”

“Off you trot?” Minerva asked, looking at Albus as though he had gone completely insane. Then again, he probably had.

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry’s legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food. He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden behind sliding panels and hanging tapestries. They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

“Peeves!” George said.

“Peeves,” Percy whispered to the first years. “A poltergeist.” He raised his voice, “Peeves – show yourself.”

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

“More like a farting sound,” Sirius said, then he made the sound for himself.

“Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?”

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

“Ooooooooooh!” he said, with an evil cackle. “Ickle Firsties! What fun!”

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

“Go away, Peeves, or the Baron’ll hear about this, I mean it!” barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville’s head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

“You know, that really did hurt. Come to think of it...everything happens to me. I get pelted by walking sticks, my broom bucks me off, the Cornish pixies hang me from a chandelier...I’m beginning to think that maybe I should take a sip of Felix Felicis every day. To bad people get addicted, otherwise I might,” Neville said.

“You want to watch out for Peeves,” said Percy, as they set off again. “The Bloody Baron’s the only one who can control him, he won’t even listen to us prefects. Here we are.”

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat lady in a pink silk dress.

“Agnes!” Sirius said in a cheerful voice.

“Agnes?” Neville asked.

Sirius looked incredulous. “It’s her name. Didn’t any of you ever ask her?”

The silence was the only response he got. He huffed under his breath then began to read again.

“Password?” she said.

“Caput Draconis,” said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it – Neville

needed a leg up – and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. At the top of a spiral staircase – they were obviously in one of the towers – they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their pajamas and fell into bed.

“Great food, isn’t it?” Ron muttered to Harry through the hangings. “Get off, Scabbers! He’s chewing my sheets.”

Harry was going to ask Ron if he’d had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much, because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell’s turban, which kept telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny. Harry told the turban he didn’t want to be in Slytherin; it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully – and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it – then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold – there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

“That’s creepy. I didn’t even remember that dream, but this Rowling person does. Not to mention the fact that that dream sounds beyond scary,” Harry said.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke the next day, he didn’t remember the dream at all.

Harry smirked. “Told you.”

“You know, Harry,” Ron said, “you look an awful lot like Snape when you do that. It’s scary.”

Sirius nodded solemnly at these words of wisdom.

“Thanks, Ron, thanks a lot for that comparison,” Harry said.

Remus quickly grabbed the book from Sirius who had begun screaming.

He read the title and realized exactly why Sirius was in hysterics.

Chapter Eight: The Potions Master

Harry looked at Severus as said solemnly, "Be afraid, be very afraid."

Severus looked confused. "Why should a chapter about me scare me?"

"You remember a few minutes ago when you said that you probably hated me?"

"Yes..." Snape said.

"You did."

Snape paled. The Marauders were going to murder him. He just knew it.

"There, look."

Harry groaned.

"Where?"

"Next to the tall kid with the red hair."

"Wearing the glasses?"

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his scar?"

"Well, that's just rude," Lily commented.

“They’re teenagers, Lily,” James said. “Teenagers are rude.”

Remus smirked. “You do realize that you just insulted all of us...right, James?”

James ignored him.

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn’t, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

“And because it was annoying,” Harry said.

Ron nodded in agreement.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts:

“Actually,” Remus said, “that doesn’t include the ones in the secret passages, or the ones in the different Houses.”

Ron stared at him in shock. “Hermione really does act like a female version of you.” He shook his head in disgust. “And I thought that you were cooler than that because you were a Marauder.”

Hermione’s face turned red. SLAP! Her hand hit Ron’s face with the force of a rogue bludger. “That’s it! I’ve had it!” She leapt to her feet.

Everyone was staring at her in shock.

Draco whispered, “This reminds me of the time she punched me. It is so much cooler when it’s someone else who pissed her off,” to Luna.

Hermione was not paying attention to the ferret...erm...the ass.

“You!” she snapped at Ron. “Switch seats with Fred! Now!”



Ron dove out of his seat, shoved Fred into it, and collapsed into the empty chair.

Hermione plopped back down into her seat and huffed angrily. "I am sick of being treated like I have some sort of disease simply because I don't like breaking rules and I like learning new things."

"Oh, come on, Hermy, you're not that bad." Ron clearly had a death wish.

"Don't call me Hermy! And what, pray tell, do you mean I'm 'not that bad'!"

"Just that...sure you're a right pain when you act all prissy and bossy, but we still put up with you."

Sirius and James winced.

"PUT UP WITH ME!"

"Yeah...I mean...I put up with you 'cause we're s'posed to be together someday. I dunno why Harry does though."

Hermione glared at Ron. "We will never be together," she said in a frosty tone.

"Oh, come on...don't be like that," Ron replied. "If not me, then who d'ya think you would date...Fred or George?" He laughed.

Fred opened his mouth to argue, but didn't get to.

Hermione flipped her hair, jumped out of her chair, straddled Fred's lap, grabbed the back of his head and began to snog the daylights out of him.

Ron's mouth fell open in shock. When Fred slid a hand into her hair and pressed the other against the small of her back, Ron whimpered.

The two continued to snog for the next ten minutes or so, until Minerva cleared her throat loudly.

“As fascinating as this all is...Can we continue now?” she said.

Hermione blushed furiously as she climbed off of Fred’s lap and sat back down in her chair to applause from George, Draco, James and Sirius. Harry just sat there looking uncomfortable.

Fred sat there pink faced and grinning.

Remus cleared his throat and began to read again.

... wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn’t open unless you asked them politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place,

“The Kitchens!” Sirius yelled.

...and doors that weren’t really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

“They can,” Minerva commented idly.

The ghosts didn’t help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open.

“Oy, what about Nick?” James asked.

Remus ignored him.

Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction, but Peeves the poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for

class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet, pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose and screech, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

Sirius grabbed James' nose and screeched, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

James gave him a look. "Keep it up, Padfoot, and I'll name Moony as Harry's godfather."

Sirius dropped his hand as though it had been burned.

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch.

Harry and James both nodded in agreement.

Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning.

"Awesome!" James, Sirius, and Remus yelled and clapped.

Filch found them trying to force their way through a door which unluckily turned out to be the entrance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor.

"Cool!" Sirius said. "They found it on their first day!"

He wouldn't believe they were lost,

Lily looked skeptical. "Where you?" she asked.

"YES!" Harry yelled desperately.

...was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons

"No way! He didn't threaten us with that until two months into the school term," James yelled in shock. "You guys are so bloody amazing!"

...when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Harry growled.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris, a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamplike eyes just like Filch's. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she'd whisk off for Filch, who'd appear, wheezing, two seconds later.

"She's not so bad," Ginny said. "She likes me."

James looked impressed.

Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins)

Again the twins were applauded.

...and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

"That's just mean!" Lily and Ginny both snapped.

And then, once you managed to find them, there were the lessons themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

"Muggles!" Harry said before anyone could comment on this.

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout, where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only class taught by a ghost.

“No way! Binns is still working even though he’s dead?” Lily asked.

“Yep!” Harry said.

Professor Binns had been very old indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up the next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him.

Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.

“If he’s making mistakes like that, then he shouldn’t still be working,” Minerva said to Dumbledore. “When we get home, you will fire him and hire a competent teacher.”

Albus nodded, but kept his mouth shut.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to be seen over his desk.

Lily smiled. “He’s my favorite teacher,” she said.

“Mine too,” Hermione agreed.

At the start of their first lesson he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

The Marauders chuckled.

Professor McGonagall was again different. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn’t a teacher to cross.

She smirked.

Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

Her smirk transformed into a full-blown grin.

“Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts,” she said. “Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned.”

“You let me back, McGee,” Sirius said curiously.

“Yes, well...that’s you...I was talking to them,” she waved towards Harry and his friends.

“I told you she had a crush on me, James!”

James slapped a Galleon into Sirius’ hand.

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn’t wait to get started, but soon realized they weren’t going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time.

“Too right,” Lily said. “That’s fifth year material.”

After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and gave Hermione a rare smile.

“No fair!” Sirius yelled. “We’ve been trying to get her to smile for years.”

Hermione smirked at him.

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell’s lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke.

“What? Why?” James asked. “It’s Defense Against the Dark Arts. It can’t be a joke.”

“Wait and see,” Harry said.

His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he’d met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren’t sure they believed this story.

Harry snorted.

For one thing, when Seamus Finnegan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban, and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Harry laughed. “I wish that was all it was stuffed with.”

This earned him some strange looks from those who weren’t in the know.

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn’t miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn’t had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn’t have much of a head start.

“Too right,” Hermione muttered.

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

The professors applauded.

“What have we got today?” Harry asked Ron as he poured sugar on his porridge.

“Double Potions with the Slytherins,” Harry, Ron and Neville said as one.

“Double Potions with the Slytherins,” said Ron. “Snape’s Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them – we’ll be able to see if it’s true.”

“He does,” Harry said.

“Wish McGonagall favored us,” said Harry.

The woman in question glared at him.

Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn’t stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

“Honestly, how else do you expect to learn?” she asked.

Ron muttered something about Hermione, but everyone just ignored him.

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast, circling the tables until they saw their owners and dropping letters and packages on to their laps.

Harry figured it would just save time if he said, “Muggles,” whenever something surprised the young him from the story.

Hedwig hadn’t brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls.



“Wow, Harry, your familiar is really attentive to you,” Lily commented.

Harry just shrugged. He didn’t really know what he should say to that.

This morning, however, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry’s plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:

“Hagrid,” Harry said with a small smile for his first friend.

Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three? I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry borrowed Ron’s quill, scribbled Yes, please, see you later on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

“So polite,” Lily murmured.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

Severus flinched. That didn’t sound good.

At the start-of-term-banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him.

Snape winced.

By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he’d been wrong.

Then sighed in relief.

Snape didn't dislike Harry – he hated him.

And winced again.

Potions lessons took place in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape smiled briefly at this description. He liked creepy.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

“Uh-oh,” he muttered.

“Ah, yes,” he said softly, “Harry Potter. Our new – celebrity.”

The marauders glared at him.

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered behind their hands. Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

Even Draco shuddered at that description.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,” he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word – like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort.

He smirked at this, as well.

“As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins,

bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death – if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

"That's a good speech," Snape said to himself. "Damn, I'm good."

"It impressed me," Harry said. "And it scared me just a little."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Swot," Ron muttered.

"Says the boy who would have failed every examination he ever took if it weren't for me," she responded.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly.

"Uh-oh," Snape said. He had a bad feeling about this.

"What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"The Draught of Living Death," Lily and Harry said together.

Lily continued by saying, "That's a fifth year question, Sev."

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand shot into the air.

Lily stared at her in shock. She knew the answer?

"I don't know, sir," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

Snape winced. Not good he thought desperately.

” Tut, tut – fame clearly isn’t everything.”

He ignored Hermione’s hand.

Hermione glared at him.

“Let’s try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

“In the stomach of a goat,” Harry said. “Third year question.”

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn’t have the faintest idea what a bezoar was.

Hermione had turned red in embarrassment.

He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

“I was an ass,” Malfoy muttered.

Luna smiled dreamily. “You still are, but you’re my ass.”

Everyone else looked as though they were struggling to hold in their laughter.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Thought you wouldn’t open a book before coming, eh, Potter?”

Sirius glared at his school nemesis.

Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes. He had looked through his books at the Dursleys’, but did Snape expect

him to remember everything in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi?

James glared with Sirius.

Snape was still ignoring Hermione's quivering hand.

Fred smiled at her. "You're adorable when you blush."

Her face turned even redder.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"They are the same thing, a plant called aconite," Harry answered.

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching towards the dungeon ceiling.

She groaned.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

"Good one, Harry!" James said to his son.

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus's eye and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

"Sit down," he snapped at Hermione. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

"You remember that from your first year?" Lily asked.

"He scared me," Harry said in explanation.

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor house for your cheek, Potter."

"Sorry," Severus said.

Harry's eyes went wide. "O-okay..." he mumbled in shock.

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like.

"I am his godson," Draco muttered. "He'd better like me."

"Only when you're not being a brat."

"That hurts, Uncle Sev, that really hurts."

He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs

"Which were actually a little runny," Harry muttered.

Hermione nodded in agreement.

Draco would have given them a rude gesture, but his hands were still hooves.

...when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

“That really hurt,” Neville said.

“You must have added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire,” Severus said knowingly.

“Idiot boy!” snarled Snape,

“Sorry,” he muttered to Neville who stared in shock.

...clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. “I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?”

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

“Take him up to the hospital wing,” Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

“You – Potter – why didn’t you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he’d make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That’s another point you’ve lost for Gryffindor.”

The Marauders glared at Snape.

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

“Don’t push it,” he muttered. “I’ve heard Snape can turn very nasty.”

The man himself blushed.

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry’s mind was racing and his spirits were low. He’d lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week – why did Snape hate him so much?

“I wish those were the only points I lost that year.”

“Cheer up,” said Ron. “Snape’s always taking points off Fred and George.

“But we keep track and try to earn back just as many as we lost by the end of the year,” George commented.

Hermione’s eyes widened and flicked to Fred. She seemed to think for a moment; then quickly, before she lost her nerve, pecked him on the lips.

He grinned goofily, looking as though he’d been clubbed over the head.

Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?”

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, “Back, Fang – back.”

Hagrid's big hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

” Hang on,” he said. “Back, Fang.”

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

“Woah...” James said in awe. “Fang’s only about a foot high right now. How big is he, Harry?”

“He comes up to my ribcage now.”

“Wicked...” he breathed.



There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

“Make yerselves at home,” said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears.

Ron blushed. “He always does that to me.”

Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

“This is Ron,” Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes on to a plate.

“Rock cakes.” Harry shuddered.

“Floss,” Hermione said.

“Another Weasley, eh?” said Hagrid, glancing at Ron’s freckles. “I spend half me life chasin’ yer twin brothers away from the forest.”

“We’ll have to thank him when we get home, won’t we, Gred?”

“Right you are, Forge. High praise that...improves our reputations as troublemakers.”

Sirius nodded in agreement.

The rock cakes almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they told Hagrid about their first lessons.

“Aw,” Lily said. “You are so sweet.”

Harry looked uncomfortable about being praised so much for his manners.

Fang rested his head on Harry’s knee and drooled over his robes.

“He always does that,” he said.

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Filch “that old git.”

“An’ as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I’d like ter introduce her to Fang sometime.

Sirius snickered.

D’yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere? Can’t get rid of her – Filch puts her up to it.”

Harry told Hagrid about Snape’s lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the students.

The Potions Master smirked.

“But he seemed to really hate me.”

James glared at Severus whose smirk faded.

“Rubbish!” said Hagrid. “Why should he?”

Yet Harry couldn’t help thinking that Hagrid didn’t quite meet his eyes when he said that.

“He probably didn’t,” Luna said.

“How’s yer brother Charlie?” Hagrid asked Ron. “I liked him a lot – great with animals.”

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose.

“Yes,” everyone said matter-of-factly.

While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie’s work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:

## GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts' goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

McGonagall and Snape exchanged looks, and the teens from the seventies looked curious.

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry. "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

James' eyes widened.

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake.

Sirius exchanged a curious look with James. Why was Hagrid acting strangely about the break-in?

Harry read the story again. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package. Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

"Undoubtedly," Remus muttered.

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse,

Lily beamed.

...Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid.

Minerva looked disgruntled.

Had Hagrid collected that package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

"All very good questions," James said. He looked thoughtful and proud at the same time.

"I wonder what the package was?" Sirius said.

Harry, Hermione and Ron all rolled their eyes and yelled, "THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE!"

Sirius flinched.

Sirius Black played what character in 'Batman Begins'? For 20 Points.

He also played what character in 'Lost in Space'? 15 Points.

'Fifth Element'? 10 Points.

As Remus handed the book to Harry he asked, "Hey, Prongs, Padfoot, are either of you wondering why Peter isn't here and how he is doing?"

"No!" they said together.

"Oh, 'cause it just seems odd to me that he wasn't taken with us."

Harry sighed and decided to start reading before he said something he shouldn't.

## Chapter Nine: The Midnight Duel

"Shit," Harry said, his face paling.

"What?" James asked.

"I'm gonna be dead," Harry said, a bit melodramatically.

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy.

"Thanks, Potter...You had to compare me to that pig."

Harry smiled, "Well you are both barn-yard animals."

Still, first-year Gryffindors only had potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much.

"Thank goodness," James said.

"Well, you Potters are all goodness and fluff, aren't you," Draco said sarcastically.

Sirius couldn't help himself. "Yes, they are!"

Draco snorted.

Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room which made them groan. Flying lessons

"Hey..." Sirius said, "flying lessons are awesome. Why would they make you groan?"

Harry continued.

...would be starting on Thursday – and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Oh, that would cause groans."

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

Malfoy smirked.

"You know, Draco...I seem to recall..." Harry began.

Malfoy's smirk faded. "Shut. Up." he barked.

Harry smirked.

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

"Hey! No it isn't!"

"Then how come you've never beaten me?" Harry asked.

"That's just...you're not...Oh, bugger it."

Malfoy certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first-years never getting in the house Quidditch teams

Harry snickered.

...and told long, boastful stories which always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters.

“Ridiculous,” Severus said. “Your father wouldn’t let you go higher than fifty feet. No helicopter could fly that low over Malfoy Manor.”

Draco had the grace to blush at being caught in a lie.

He wasn’t the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he’d spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who’d listen about the time he’d almost hit a hand-glider on Charlie’s old broom.

“Yeah right, Ron,” George began.

“A hang-glider in Ottery St. Catchpole?” Fred continued.

“It’s ridiculous.”

Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly.

“The best sport ever!” James, Sirius, Ron and the twins said together.

Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn’t see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean’s poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Lily and Hermione stared at Ron.

“Muggle photos don’t move,” Lily said.

Ron just sank down in his seat.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

"Sorry, Neville," Harry said.

"You were right, Harry, even I don't blame you for feeling that way. I'm clumsy...it's a fact of life."

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book - not that she hadn't tried.

"You tried to learn to fly from a book?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Hey!" Lily snapped. "I did that too. Leave her alone."

Draco decided that if he ever wanted to have his own ears and hands back, then he'd better think before he talked from now on.

At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd got out of a library book called Quidditch through the Ages.

"Good book, but definitely not the way to learn to fly," James said.

"I agree with you about that book, Dad. It is interesting."

Neville was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

"I'd have been pleased too. No one likes to be lectured," Remus said from experience.

Hermione sighed. "I know that now."



Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

"Erm, sorry about being a git about your home life, Harry," Draco said.

"No problem. Just don't do it to anyone else, okay?"

"Yeah," Draco gave a wry smile.

Luna beamed and began to hum Weasley is Our King.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"My Rememberall!" Neville exclaimed. "I wonder what ever happened to it."

The Marauders couldn't help it. They had to laugh.

Thankfully, Neville saw the humor in what he'd said, and laughed as well.

"It's a Rememberall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things – this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red – oh..." His face fell, because the Rememberall had suddenly glowed scarlet, "... you've forgotten something..."

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Rememberall out of his hand.

"Sorry," Draco said cringing.

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfoy, but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

She smirked as Sirius said, "She always is," quite mournfully.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Rememberall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Rememberall back on the table.

"It's good to know that I can still scare the first years," Minerva said somewhat smugly.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day

"Sounds like ideal Quidditch conditions," James said.

Harry looked up from the book. "They were."

...and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

"Very poetic sounding," Lily said.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

“They do!” Fred and George said.

“Well, they are quite old...” Hermione commented.

Harry looked at Professor McGonagall, and said, “Then they should get new ones. Honestly, those things are hazardous.”

Neville nodded his head vigorously.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, grey hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

“Rolanda!” Sirius cried happily.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Sirius is quite popular amongst the females in the castle,” James said.

Remus continued, “It doesn’t matter if they are paintings, statues, students, house elves, animals, or professors. If they are female, then they like Sirius.”

Hermione “Hmph”ed skeptically.

Sirius took that to be a challenge and looked at her with an adoring expression in his eyes. “Darling, surely you don’t doubt my charms.”

“Don’t call me ‘Darling’,” she said, but it lacked any venom.

Harry looked very uncomfortable with this turn of events.

“Well, what are you all waiting for?” she barked. “Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up.”

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

James cringed.

“Stick out your right hand over your broom,” called Madam Hooch at the front, “and say, ‘Up!’”

“Up!” Sirius shouted, then looked disappointed when nothing happened.

“UP!” everyone shouted.

Harry’s broom jumped into his hand at once,

“Go Harry!” James yelled, high-fiving Sirius.

...but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger’s had simply rolled over on the ground and Neville’s hadn’t moved at all.

“Brooms can sense when you’re scared,” Sirius stated knowingly. If something interested Sirius, then he learned everything he could about it. In fact, he was quite capable of building his own broom if he wanted to.

Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville’s voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

“I did want to...I wish I had,” Neville mumbled.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he’d been doing it wrong for years.

Malfoy blushed as Harry and Ron snickered in remembrance. The other boys all snickered as well; after all, despite his bragging, Draco was still just an average flyer.

“Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard,” said Madam Hooch. “Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet and

then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle – three – two – ”

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madame Hooch’s lips.

Neville groaned.

“Come back, boy!” she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle – twelve feet – twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and –

“Uh-oh,” Remus said, sensing danger.

WHAM –

Harry said loudly, causing everyone to flinch.

...a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily towards the forbidden forest and out of sight.

“Ouch!” Severus muttered. He knew how much that had to hurt from his own experience.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

“Broken wrist,” Harry heard her mutter. “Come on, boy – it’s all right, up you get.”

“Skelegrow?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Neville said.

“Nasty stuff, idnit?”

Neville nodded. “Real nasty.”

She turned to the rest of the class.

“None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you’ll be out of Hogwarts before you can say ‘Quidditch’. Come on, dear.”

“Hey!” Sirius yelled loudly. “She never called me ‘dear’!”

“Yes, but Neville has an innocence to him that you lack,” Hermione commented.

“I’m innocent!”

Everyone burst into laughter at that, and it was several minutes before Harry could begin to read again.

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

“Aw!” came from all of the girls, even McGonagall. “That’s so sweet.”

Neville turned pink.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

“Did you see his face, the great lump?”

“Oy, who’re you calling a great lump?” Neville snapped.

“Sorry,” Draco muttered. “If it weren’t the whole ferret threat, I’d ask to leave. I just keep on having to apologize.”

The other Slytherins joined in.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” snapped Parvati Patil.

“Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?” said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. “Never thought you’d like fat little cry babies, Parvati.”

“You know,” Draco said disgustedly, “before Hogwarts, they were best friends. Figures...they get sorted into rival houses, and BAM! There goes that friendship.”

Everyone jumped when he yelled ‘bam’, but they all could understand his disgust.

“Look!” said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. “It’s that stupid thing Longbottom’s gran sent him.”

“Oh crap, I hate myself,” Draco said burying his face in his hands.

The Rememberall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

“Give that here, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

James leaned forward. He could feel a fight coming on.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

“I think I’ll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find – how about – up a tree?”

Lily gasped. “How could you?”

“I was an ass,” Draco said yet again. “I’m beginning to realize why I never had any real friends.”

“Give it here!” Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt on to his broomstick and taken off. He hadn’t been lying, he could fly well – hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, “Come and get it, Potter!”

“You’re grounded!” Severus snapped to his godson.

“I’m only two! You can’t ground me!” Draco said incredulously.

“Watch me!”

Harry grabbed his broom.

“No!” shouted Hermione Granger. “Madam Hooch told us not to move – you’ll get us all into trouble.”

“Listen to her, Harry,” Lily said.

Harry ignored her.

“That’s it! You’re grounded too!”

“B-but, Mum!” Harry said.

“No buts,” she snapped.

“Oh, come on, Lily. It was five years ago for him. You can’t punish him now,” James said, trying to reason with her.

“Hmph. If Sev can ground Draco, then I can ground Harry. After all, Harry’s my son. Draco is just Sev’s godson.”

As James opened his mouth to argue, Harry said, “It’s okay, Dad. Just drop it. If you don’t watch it, you’ll still be sleeping on the couch by the time Mom is supposed to become pregnant with me. I would kinda like to exist, you know.”

James eyes widened. “Right. Good point.”

“I’ll continue, shall I,” Harry asked rhetorically.



Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair and his robes whipped out behind him – and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught – this was easy, this was wonderful.

“That’s my boy!” James said proudly.

He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in mid-air. Malfoy looked stunned.

“Yes, well, you’d never been on a broom before, of course I was stunned!”

“Give it here,” Harry called, “or I’ll knock you off that broom!”

Harry grinned evilly. “I’ve done that before!”

Draco nodded. “It hurt too.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Malfoy trying to sneer, but looking worried.

“You were a natural. I was worried,” he muttered

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leant forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Malfoy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

Lily was now biting a fingernail nervously.

“No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy,” Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

“Yup, with the force of a bludger,” Draco commented.

“Catch it if you can, then!” he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

“Jerk!” Hermione stated.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down – next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball –

Lily screamed. She seemed to have nerves of jello. Harry privately thought that she might be in need of a psychiatrist. It was over, it was the past.

“You did a Wronski Feint your first time on a broom!” Sirius yelled, ignoring Lily, and leaping to his feet. “Prongs! Your son is a Quidditch PRODIGY!”

James leapt to his feet and the two of them did some sort of Indian dance that involved a lot of stomping feet and war cries.

Finally Minerva hexed them, and they sat back down.

...wind whistled in his ears, mingling with the screams of people watching – he stretched out his hand – a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently on to the grass with the Rememberall clutched safely in his fist.

James whistled.

“HARRY POTTER!”

And muttered, “Ah, man...its McGonagall.”

“Excuse me?” she asked tersely.

“I-I mean...Awesome...its McGonagall,” James said shakily.

“Hmph! That’s better.”

His heart sank faster than he’d just dived. Professor McGonagall was running towards them. He got to his feet trembling.

“As you should be,” the professor said.

“Never – in all my time at Hogwarts – ”

“Really?” Sirius asked.

She just gave him one of those looks.

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock,

“Wow! That’s a first,” Severus said in a snide tone of voice.

“Oh...go kiss a mongoose,” Minerva snapped.

“Kiss a mongoose?” everyone said.

Minerva refused to respond.

...and her glasses flashed furiously, “– how dare you – might have broken your neck – ”

“How can glasses flash? Flash is an action verb, and glasses can’t do any actions,” George asked.

Luna smiled at him dreamily. “It was meant to be a description of the sun’s reflection off of them.”

“Oookay...”

“It wasn’t his fault, Professor – ”

“Be quiet, Miss Patil – ”

“But Malfoy – ”

“Hey! I didn’t make him fly. I was just goading him,” Draco muttered.

“That’s enough, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now.”

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it.

“I wouldn’t expel a student for that. Just put them in detention for the rest of the school year,” Minerva said.

Draco did not look pleased. He knew full well that Harry hadn’t been punished.

He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he’d done it. He hadn’t even lasted two weeks. He’d be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

“Oh, Harry,” Lily said sadly. “Grounding rescinded...I think you punished yourself enough.”

Harry’s mouth fell open in shock. From everything he’d heard about his mother, she didn’t seem to be the type to just drop a punishment. But, then again, the Dursleys were punishment enough for any crime.

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside and still Professor McGonagall didn’t say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper.

Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others become wizards while he stumped the grounds, carrying Hagrid's bag.

Lily again looked near to tears.

Perhaps she was depressed. Harry thought to himself. He didn't know much about women, and even less about his mother.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

James' body jerked in an odd sort of spasm, and he made a funny sound in his throat. "Gonna kill Dursleys. Making him think that."

"Fred?"

"George."

"Prank 212, 'Do Unto Others' subplot 'Revenge'?"

"Toss in a few 'Nightmare Knockouts' and that's a yes."

"Got it."

But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwick's class looking confused.

The Marauders and the professors also looked confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

“In here.”

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

Sirius snickered. “Betcha the words were the ones we taught him, Prongs.”

James snickered as well.

Minerva looked furious. “That was YOU!”

The boys flinched.

Harry was worried that his father was going to be murdered before he (Harry) was ever created, so began to read loudly to distract the professor.

“Out, Peeves!” she barked.

“But you’re a cat,” Sirius said.

Minerva simply glared at him.

Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

“Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood – I’ve found you a Seeker.”

“Ah,” James said, “he’s the Quidditch Captain.”

Minerva looked delighted. “I get Harry as a Seeker on my house team! Take that, Severus!” she said, leaning passed Dumbledore to playfully punch Snape on the arm.

Wood’s expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

“Are you serious, Professor?”

Sirius looked as though Wood had just committed sacrilege. “No one – I repeat – NO ONE should EVER joke about Quidditch.”

All the boys except Neville, who really wasn't into sports, nodded solemnly.

“Absolutely,” said Professor McGonagall crisply. “The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?”

“If this book is to be believed, then why aren't you playing professionally?” Minerva asked.

“I'm fifteen.”

“SO! What does age have to do with being a good Seeker?”

Harry hadn't ever really thought about playing professionally. Of course, he'd been a little distracted by the current dark lord wanting to murder him. “I'll think about it,” he finally said.

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

“He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive,” Professor McGonagall told Wood. “Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it.”

“Awesome!” James whispered.

Sirius looked confused. “Who's Charlie Weasley?”

Fred decided to answer. “He's our older brother. A brilliant Seeker, was even offered a spot on England's team, but he decided to run off to play with dragons instead.”

“Weird!” Sirius said looking confused.

“I know!” Fred agreed.

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

“They had,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” George agreed. “Wood never even looked twice at a girl...or a boy either, come to that. He could be gay, but who would know. It’s not like he’s ever even dated someone.”

“Yep, he’s obsessed alright,” Fred agreed.

“Okay! Quidditch is awesome,” Sirius said, “but that’s just not right. I mean, girls have – like – like, you know.” Sirius made a gesture with his hands to imply curves.

All the guys nodded at that. Lily looked sickened.

“Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?” he asked excitedly.

“Wood’s the captain of the Gryffindor team,” Professor McGonagall explained.

“He’s just the build for a Seeker, too,” said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. “Light – speedy – we’ll have to get him a decent broom, Professor – a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I’d say.”

The Marauders whimpered. They had mentioned the Nimbus again.

“I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can’t bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn’t look Severus Snape in the face for weeks....”



Snape looked particularly pleased at that. "Tea, Minerva?" he asked the now spluttering witch.

"Uh-huh," she said weakly.

He poured her a cup from the teapot that appeared in front of him.

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud,"

"Damn straight!" James said in an excellent imitation of John Wayne.

...she said. "He was an excellent Quidditch player himself."

James beamed. "Thanks, Professor, I always knew you cared."

Minerva smiled at the Head Boy/Quidditch Captain. She really did think of him as a son. A tear welled up in her eye at the thought of his death.

"You're joking."

It was dinner time. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall.

Sirius glared at Ron. "Never joke about Quidditch!" he snapped.

Ron nodded mutely.

Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

“Seeker?” he said. “But first years never – you must be the youngest house player in about – ”

“– a century,” said Harry, shoveling pie in his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. “Wood told me.”

James whimpered, then whispered, “My son is amazing. No one in our family has ever broken so many records before.”

Ron was so amazed, so impressed; he just sat and gaped at Harry.

“I don’t blame you,” Sirius said.

“I start training next week,” said Harry. “Only don’t tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret.”

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

“Well done,” said George in a low voice. “Wood told us. We’re on the team too – Beaters.”

“They any good, Harry,” James asked.

Harry grinned. “In the words of Wood, ‘They are more than a match for the bludgers; their like a couple of rogue bludgers themselves’.”

“George.”

“Yes, Fred.”

“Let’s thank Wood too. Between him and Hagrid, our reputations have skyrocketed.”

“I made note of it.”

“Good.”

“I tell you, we’re going to win that Quidditch Cup for sure this year,” said Fred. “We haven’t won since Charlie left, but this year’s team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us.”

“He was scaring the first years,” George said to Harry.

“Anyway, we’ve got to go; Lee Jordan reckons he’s found a new secret passageway out of the school.”

“Bet it’s that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week.

“Amazing!” Sirius yelled. “It took us ‘til fourth year to find that one!”

The twins grinned.

See you.”

Fred and George hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

Groans were heard from nearly everyone.

“Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?”

“I was cruel,” Draco stated.

“You’re a lot braver now you’re back on the ground and you’ve got your little friends with you,” said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle,

“Too right,” Ron muttered remembering the Polyjuice potion.

...but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

“I’d take you on any time on my own,” said Malfoy. “Tonight, if you want. Wizard’s duel. Wands only – no contact. What’s the matter? Never heard of a wizard’s duel before, I suppose?”

“Don’t you dare!” Lily said to Harry.

He flinched.

“Of course he has,” said Ron, wheeling round. “I’m his second, who’s yours?”

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

“Crabbe,” he said.

“I was an idiot! Crabbe can barely hold a wand straight, never mind actually use it,” Draco stated. “He’s a bloody Neanderthal.”

Hermione snickered at that.

“Midnight all right?”

“What, Malfoy? No honor in Slytherin?” Harry couldn’t help asking.

Snape glared at Malfoy, he’d already realized what his godson must have done.

We’ll meet you in the trophy room, that’s always unlocked.”

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other.

“What is a wizard’s duel?” said Harry.

“Hah! I knew it!” Malfoy yelled.

“Muggles,” Harry said yet again.

“And what do you mean, you’re my second?”

“Well, a second’s there to take over if you die,” said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry’s face, he added quickly, “But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy’ll be able to do is send sparks at each other. Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway.”

“Actually, I did already know some hexes and things,” Malfoy said. “But I did expect you to refuse.”

“And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?”

“Throw it away and punch him on the nose,” Ron suggested.

“You know, that’s funny. I never did get to punch Malfoy, but Hermione sure did,” Harry said proudly.

“Awesome!” Sirius yelled. “I LOVE YOU!”

Hermione turned pink.

Sirius realized what he’d just said, and turned pink himself.

“Excuse me.”

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

“Can’t a person eat in peace in this place?” said Ron.

“Jerk,” said Hermione

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

” I couldn’t help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying – ”

“Bet you could,” Ron muttered.

“– and you mustn’t go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you’ll lose Gryffindor if you’re caught, and you’re bound to be. It’s really selfish of you.”

“I would just like to interrupt to say,” Hermione said, “That attitude only lasted until Halloween.”

Lily looked disappointed in her.

Sirius looked proud.

“And it’s really none of your business,” said Harry.

“Sorry, Hermione.”

“No problem, Harry.”

“Goodbye,” said Ron.

All the same, it wasn’t what you’d call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling asleep (Neville wasn’t back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as “If he tries to curse you, you’d better dodge it, because I can’t remember how to block them.”

“Some advice, Weasley! That’s really helpful. He’d be more likely to pass out from nerves, than actually dodge something,” Draco said in disgust.

There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today.

“Push it!” Sirius said. “Push your luck ‘til it breaks, that’s the only way to live.”

Lily did not look pleased. “I’m naming Minerva, Harry’s godmother.”

Sirius whimpered.

On the other hand, Malfoy’s sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness – this was his big chance to beat Malfoy, face to face. He couldn’t miss it.

“With advice like what Weasley was giving you, you’d have lost,” Draco muttered. He really seemed to enjoy insulting Ron. Then again, Ron was giving him good ammunition.

“Half past eleven,” Ron muttered at last. “We’d better go.”

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them, “I can’t believe you’re going to do this, Harry.”

“I can’t believe you are either,” Lily said. “Why didn’t you inherit my common sense?”

“Lily, he’s a boy. Boys think differently. They think about not looking like spineless chickens,” James said.

She hmphed.

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

Ginny gave Hermione a funny look.

“What?!” Hermione snapped, “My mother bought it for me. What was I supposed to say? Sorry, Mum, I hate the color pink?”

“Yes!” Ginny said. “Remember ‘The List’. We will never wear pink.”

Hermione sighed. “That was before we made ‘The List’.”

Ginny did not look happy. “Fine!”

“You!” said Ron furiously. “Go back to bed!”

“I almost told your brother,” Hermione snapped, “Percy – he’s a Prefect, he’d put a stop to this.”

Harry couldn’t believe anyone could be so interfering.

“And somehow, you still always manage to surprise me,” he said to Hermione.

“Come on,” he said to Ron. He pushed the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn’t going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

“Angry goose! What the bleep does she mean ‘angry goose’?” Hermione snapped.

“She’s scary when mad,” Sirius whispered to Remus.

“Don’t you care about Gryffindor, do you only care about yourselves, I don’t want Slytherin to win the house cup, and you’ll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells.”

“Go away.”

“All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you’re on the train home tomorrow, you’re so – ”



But what they were, they didn't find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor tower.

"Well that's ironic," Fred said.

George grinned. "Moronic too."

"George."

"Yes, Hermione."

"I'm planning your death. I just thought you should know."

George paled. "I'll just shut up now."

"Good idea."

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked shrilly.

"That's your problem," said Ron. "We've got to go, we're going to be late."

"That was rude, Ron," Fred said to his brother.

"So."

They hadn't even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You are not."

“D’you think I’m going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I’ll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you and you can back me up.”

“Oh no they won’t,” James said.

“That’s rude of you to assume that, when it was your own fault that you got stuck outside. You were the one nagging them,” Sirius said.

“You’ve got some nerve – ” said Ron loudly.

“See,” James said.

“Shut up, both of you!” said Harry sharply. “I heard something.”

It was a sort of snuffling.

“Mrs. Norris?” George asked.

“Mrs. Norris?” breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

Ginny started to laugh under her breath.

It wasn’t Mrs. Norris.

“Thank goodness,” James said.

It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but jerked awake as they crept nearer.

“Poor Neville,” Lily said, making him blush.

“Thank goodness you found me! I’ve been out here for hours. I couldn’t remember the new password to get into bed.”

“Funny,” Sirius said, “Wormtail always forgets the passwords too.”

Neville looked ill.

“Keep your voice down, Neville. The password’s ‘Pig snout’ but it won’t help you now, the Fat Lady’s gone off somewhere.”

“How’s your arm?” said Harry.

“So polite,” Lily murmured, yet again.

“Fine,” said Neville, showing them. “Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute.”

“Poppy!” Sirius cried out.

“Good - well, look, Neville, we’ve got to be somewhere, we’ll see you later – ”

“Don’t leave me!” said Neville, scrambling to his feet. “I don’t want to stay here alone, the Bloody Baron’s been past twice already.”

Sirius shuddered.

When Harry stared at him in confusion, Remus said, “He’s terrified of the Bloody Baron.”

“But he’s a ghost, and they can’t hurt you,” Hermione said.

“Doesn’t matter to him. His boggart is the Baron,” Remus elaborated.

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

“Rude,” Hermione muttered.

“If either of you get us caught, I’ll never rest until I’ve learnt that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about and, used it on you.”

Lily opened her mouth, but before she could say a word, Harry continued.

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies, but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

“Definitely a Marauder!” James said proudly.

They flitted along the corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were lucky. They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed towards the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren’t there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness.

Ron groaned. “I spent hours polishing them in second year.”

“I would have traded detentions with you if I could,” Harry said. “Damn Lockhart.”

They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

“He’s late, maybe he’s chickened out,” Ron whispered.

“As if I could ever be scared of the two of you,” Draco muttered.

Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the blonde. “Really, Draco?”

He paled. “I meant, ‘As if I could ever be scared of Weasley’.” He gave a nervous grin.

“That’s what I thought.”

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak – and it wasn't Malfoy.

“Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner.”

“Filch! RUUUN!” Sirius screamed.

James smacked him on the back of his head. “Someone needs their afternoon na-ap,” he sang. “You’re starting to get a little jumpy there, Padfoot.”

Sirius glared at him. “I am not a toddler.”

“Then why do you act like one?” Lily asked.

He gave her a rude gesture that earned him another smack from James.

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently towards the door away from Filch's voice. Neville's robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

“They're in here somewhere,” they heard him mutter, “probably hiding.”

“This way!” Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor.

“If they were petrified, then how could they move?” Sirius asked.

Everyone stared at him.

“WHAT!”

“Nothing, Padfoot, nothing at all,” muttered Remus.

They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a frightened squeak and broke into a run – he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

“That hurt too,” Ron muttered.

Neville nodded.

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

“RUN!” Harry yelled and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following – they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Harry in the lead, without any idea where they were or where they were going –

“That’s always fun,” Fred said.

“Wandering around the castle, hopelessly lost,” George continued.

“It’s enough to make a man wish he were a first year again.”

Hermione stared at Fred who was turning pinker by the second.

...they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

“ You found the passageway behind the tapestry of Lod the Loquacious?” Remus asked.

“Who the who?” Neville asked.

Hermione answered, sounding like she’d swallowed a textbook, “Lod the Loquacious was a goblin that was renowned for his work teaching the other goblins English.”

“Oh, okay,” Neville said.

“I think we’ve lost him,” Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead. Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

“I – told – you,” Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest. “I – told – you.”

“I did!” she said smugly.

“We’ve got to get back to Gryffindor Tower,” said Ron, “quickly as possible.”

“Malfoy tricked you,” Hermione said to Harry.

“HEY!” the Marauders yelled.

“That’s low...even for a Malfoy,” Snape said.

Draco sank low in his seat.

“You realize that, don’t you? He was never going to meet you – Filch knew someone was going to be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off.”

“No duh,” Sirius said sarcastically.

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn’t going to tell her that.

“I don’t blame you,” James said shaking his head in frustration.

“Let’s go.”

It wasn’t going to be that simple. They hadn’t gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves.

Sirius summed it up for everyone when he said, “Shit!”

He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

” Shut up, Peeves – please – you’ll get us thrown out.”

Peeves cackled.

“Not good at all,” Remus said.

” Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you’ll get caughty.”

“Not if you don’t give us away, Peeves, please.”

“Please, please, please,” James and Sirius were chanting together, hands folded in prayer, their eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“Should tell Filch, I should,” said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittering wickedly. “It’s for your own good, you know.”

“Get out of the way,” snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves –

“Idiot!” Sirius yelled. “Now you’ve done it!”

…this was a big mistake.

“STUDENTS OUT OF BED!” Peeves bellowed. “STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!”

Ducking under Peeves they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor, where they slammed into a door – and it was locked.



“Wait...it can't be,” Lily muttered, her brow furrowed.

“This is it!” Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door.  
“We're done for! This is the end!”

Sirius glared at him. “It's your own fault...Oh. Merlin's. Beard...I sounded just like Mrs. Potter!”

James screamed like a girl and jumped into Lily's lap.

She did not look pleased.

Sirius looked stricken, and began to whimper, rocking in his seat. Remus began to rub his back soothingly, and, a few minutes later, Sirius was back to normal. (or at least as normal as he ever is)

At last, James climbed off of Lily, who was complaining about her legs falling asleep, and Harry could continue.

They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could towards Peeves's shouts.

“Oh, move over,” Hermione snarled.

Fred shuddered, “You're scary when you do that.”

“Thank you, Fred.” Hermione looked pleased.

She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, “Alohomora!”

“At least one of you knew that spell,” Remus said.

The lock clicked and the door swung open – they piled through it, shut it quickly and pressed their ears against it, listening.

“Which way did they go, Peeves?” Filch was saying. “Quick, tell me.”

“Say ‘please’.”

“Don’t mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?”

“Filch is in trouble,” Sirius sang.

“Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please,” said Peeves in his annoying sing-song voice.

“YES!” Sirius yelled.

The professors looked confused.

“All right – please.”

“NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn’t say nothing if you didn’t say please!

Sirius was chortling with glee.

The professors felt like idiots for not seeing that one a mile away.

Ha ha! Haaaaaa!” And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

“I learned a lot of new words from him that night,” Ron commented.

James and Sirius high-fived. It wasn’t often a person could actually say that they’d learned something from Filch.

“He thinks this door is locked,” Harry whispered. “I think we’ll be OK – get off, Neville!” For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry’s bathrobe for the last minute. “What?”

Harry turned around – and saw, quite clearly, what. For a moment, he was sure he’d walked into a nightmare – this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor.

“Not the forbidden corridor on the third floor!” Lily screamed dramatically. Unfortunately it wasn't an act, though if it had been, she would have won an Oscar for it.

The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

“Why? Why?” Remus asked in excitement.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between the ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

“The Cerberus,” Lily breathed in astonishment.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry shuddered.

Harry groped for the doorknob – between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

“I don't blame you,” Remus muttered, his eyes wide.

They fell backwards – Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew back down the corridor. Filch must have hurried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared – all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster.

“While I’m thinking of it, you four have detention as soon as you get home. There is no excuse for being out after curfew,” Professor McGonagall said stiffly.

“What if,” Harry asked, “We were taking a baby dragon to the top of the astronomy tower to get it to some dragon keepers from Romania in order to keep a good friend from getting arrested?”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “You should have trusted a professor to do that for you. Especially given the fact that Hagrid is the adult not you.”

“I never said it was Hagrid’s dragon,” Harry said quickly.

“You didn’t have to, dear.”

Harry smirked at Sirius. “Ha! She called me ‘dear’.”

“But he’s not innocent!” Sirius cried out.

Minerva smirked, “No...but he is an adorable baby.”

Harry didn’t look very pleased anymore. In fact, he looked incredibly uncomfortable.

They didn’t stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

“Where on earth have you all been?” she asked,

“That never works, why does she even bother?” Sirius asked.

No one answered.

...looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

“Never mind that – pig snout, pig snout,” panted Harry,

“Percy made up that password,” Fred commented idly.

...and the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

“Hey!”

“What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?” said Ron finally. “If any dog needs exercise, that one does.”

Everyone laughed at that. Only Ron would say something like that.

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again.

“Hey!”

“It was true!” Harry said.

“Hmph.”

“You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?” she snapped. “Didn't you see what it was standing on?”

“The floor?” James asked.

“The floor?” Harry suggested. “I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads.”

Sirius snickered.

“No, not the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something.”

“The Philosopher's Stone!” everyone but Sirius said together.

Sirius glared. "I knew that!"

She stood up, glaring at them.

"I hope you're pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed – or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

"No, we don't mind," he said. "You'd think we dragged her along, wouldn't you?"

Hermione sniffed angrily.

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed back into bed. The dog was guarding something... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide – except perhaps Hogwarts.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. Hmm, could Tom have hidden a Horcrux within the school? How would I know where to look?

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby little package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

Harry, relieved to be done, handed the book to Ginny.

"I'm hungry," Ron said suddenly.

"You're always hungry!" said Fred, George, Ginny, Harry, Hermione, and Neville.

Sirius pouted. "I'm hungry too!"

A bottle of baby formula appeared in front of him.

"Oh. Ha. Ha. Very funny," he snapped.

Now, I'm going to go to bed before...

Finish this movie quote for 10 points.

“Oh for goodness sakes,” Moera said as she entered an archway. With a wave of her hand, Draco was back to normal. “If this is what happens when I’m gone, then I’m just going to have to bring in reinforcements.”

As she finished speaking a husband and wife in England in 1996 disappeared and reappeared in the room.

“NO!” George yelled.

“I’m dead,” Ron groaned.

“I’m hungry,” Sirius muttered to Remus.

Lily said, “I’m confused.”

“I’m in love...wait...WHAT?” Fred murmured.

“Who are you?” James asked the couple.

Draco paled. “Weasleys!”

Luna began to hum Weasley is Our King again.

“Hi, Mum, Dad,” Ginny said, jumping out of her seat to hug them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said, grinning and following his girlfriend. He was promptly swallowed up in one of Molly’s infamous hugs.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1...” Moera counted down.

Sirius screamed like a little girl as a second couple appeared out of thin air. “NNNNOOOOOOOOO...It’s Mrs. Potter!”

“Hey...what about me?” a tall messy black-haired man asked.

“AAAAAAACCCCKKK!” Sirius screamed, “It’s Mr. and Mrs. Potter!”



“That’s better!” Charles Potter said, his gray eyes sparkling with mirth.

“Dad,” James said, hugging his dad. “Mum.” Rhiannon Potter hugged James just as tightly as Molly was hugging Harry.

“Ree, our son can’t breathe,” Charles said, eyes still sparkling.

“Oh, right,” she said releasing him.

“Oy, Mum!” Fred said to his mother. “Harry can’t breathe either. His face is turning blue.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear,” Molly said to her honorary son.

“Not a problem, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said, blushing.

“Is it just me, or does anyone else find it odd that all of the women except for Luna, Moera and Professor McGonagall have red hair,” Draco asked.

Moera smiled. “Draco...I already mentioned that Eros placed a charm on the Potter males so that they will only ever love red-heads. The only red-haired woman that isn’t in a relationship with a Potter is Molly Weasley.”

“Wait...do you mean that Harry and Ginny are...” Molly began.

“Yup, that’s right, Mum,” George began.

“Ickle Harrikins finally asked Gin-Gin out,” Fred finished.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Rhiannon said, “but I, for one, would like to know why I’ve been kidnapped.”

“Let me explain,” Moera began. “No, there is too much. Let me sum up...James and Lily are now engaged. Harry is their son from the

future. He is dating Ginny. Hermione and Ron are fighting, and Hermione snogged Fred. Lucius Malfoy arranged a marriage between Luna Lovegood and his son, Draco. Snape once had a crush on Lily. You are going to die in 1979. Oh, and the reason we're here is because in 1981 James and Lily are going to be murdered by Voldemort, and when he tries to kill Harry the curse will rebound onto him and destroy his body. Harry was raised by Lily's sister and her husband, Muggles; and was abused by them. We are here to prevent Dumbledore from sending him to the Muggles in the first place, because right now the future is very, very bleak. So we're reading the story about Harry's first year at Hogwarts in order to convince the meddling old man to send him to his nearest magical relations, the Diggorys."

The four new additions to the group stood in shock for several long minutes. Then...

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN LILY AND JAMES DIE IN 1981!" Ree screamed.

"ALRIGHT, JAMES! YOU FINALLY PROPOSED!" Charles yelled, high-fiving his son.

"HERMIONE SNOGGED FRED!" Molly looked as though she was about to pass out.

Arthur looked thoughtful, and, when the others had finished screaming, said, "Harry was abused?" in a dangerously quiet voice.

All four adults turned to Dumbledore. Arthur strode purposefully to him, yanked him out of his chair by the neck of his robes, and, pulling his right arm back, punched the Headmaster with enough force to break his nose.

Dumbledore sat back down with his eyes watering from the pain.

"Let's get started then," Arthur said. "The sooner we start, the sooner we can convince the old man to send Harry to the Diggorys."

“Right then,” Meora said, “Arthur is in charge. I promised to baby-sit Hermes’ children tonight.” That said, she dashed out of the room again.

“Did you notice,” said George, “that she had a date, and now she’s got to baby-sit. Since she’s the one who brought us here, I woulda thought that she’d spend more time with us instead of running off.”

Four new chairs appeared between Ron and George. After everyone was seated, Ginny began to read.

## Chapter Ten: Halloween

Malfoy couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one.

“You’d better not have any more adventures,” Lily warned.

“You’re too late, dear,” Molly said consolingly. “They’ve had more adventures than the entire Auror division put together.”

In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection.

“It’s either really valuable or really dangerous,” said Ron.

“I’m still hungry,” Sirius said loudly.

Mrs. Potter sighed. “Here.” She pulled a bag of chocolate biscuits out of her purse, and passed them down the table to him.

“Or both,” said Harry.

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

"Too right," he muttered, shuddering.

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry said embarrassedly.

"I'm not," Ron muttered.

Molly smacked the back of his head.

"OW!" he yelled. "That hurt!"

"Apologize!" she snapped.

"Sorry, Hermione," he muttered resentfully.

All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived with the post about a week later.

Harry snickered.

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention was caught at once by long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor.

"It couldn't be," James whispered.

“Please let it be,” Sirius begged. “I beg you, Oh Quidditch gods, let it be a broom!”

“Why a broom?” Charles asked. “Harry’s a first year, right? They’re not allowed brooms.”

“Oh, Dad,” James said, shaking his head slightly. “Dad, Dad, Dad, Harry is a Quidditch PRODIGY, and as such, has received special permission from the Headmaster in order to play on the Gryffindor team, as a Seeker.”

Charles’ mouth fell open in shock. “Prodigy? My grandson is a Quidditch prodigy?”

“His first time on a broom, he did a perfect Wronski Feint,” Sirius boasted.

Charles whimpered, proving once again that the phrase ‘Like father, like son’ is in fact the complete truth.

They had hardly fluttered out of the way when another owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don’t want everyone knowing you’ve got a broomstick or they’ll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch pitch at seven o’clock for your first training session.

Professor M. McGonagall

Sirius, James, Remus and Charles all whimpered.

“2000...” Charles moaned.

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

“A Nimbus Two Thousand!” Ron moaned enviously. “I’ve never even touched one.”

“I have now,” Ron said matter-of-factly.

They left the Hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle.

“Are they as large as their grandfathers?” Charles asked.

“Larger,” Draco muttered.

“Now, there’s a visual that I never wanted. They must be the size of hippopotamuses.”

“Yeah, about that size,” Draco replied.

Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

“That’s a broomstick,” he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. “You’ll be in for it this time, Potter, first-years aren’t allowed them.”

“Oh, the poor – poor fool,” Sirius said in a fake sympathetic tone.

Draco gave him a rude gesture. “It’s nice to have my hands back.”

“What do you mean?” Molly asked. “When didn’t you have your hands?”

“Well...the young me was continuously being an ass...so Ginny gave me the ears and hooves of an ass. But I really did deserve it, so please don’t get mad at her. It was a...um...learning experience.”

“Hmph,” Molly said, “I’ll be watching you.” She pointed at her daughter.

Ron couldn't resist it.

"Bet you could've," Draco muttered.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "It's a Nimbus Two Thousand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?"

"The Comet company is still in business?" Charles asked Arthur.

"Yes, but that's mostly because they sell less expensive brooms, that are alright for non-Quidditch players. Nimbus and Firebolt are the major companies right now," he explained.

"Wait! Firebolt, as in Timothy Firebolt?"

"Yes," Arthur said in confusion. "He's the owner and creator."

"Awesome! I just signed on as his silent partner. He needed funding to start his business, and, as we're friends, I gave him a little start-up money."

"Hey," George said suddenly. "Harry takes after you. He gave us his Tri-Wizard winnings to fund our joke shop, Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. We had to practically threaten him though to get him to agree to be our silent partner, and take one-third of the profits."

Harry paled. "George, you idiot! Your mother didn't know that! She's gonna murder me!"

"No, I won't, Harry. Though I do wonder why you did it," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling at him.

"Well," Harry licked his lips nervously, "I didn't want to keep the winnings because it seemed wrong to keep money won from an event that caused the death of a friend. And I know that Fred and George'll be brilliant. Their inventions are amazing, and they've already made loads more money than they spent creating the items."

Also, what better business to fund, than one that'll make people smile, especially since Voldemort is back?"

"You are an amazing young man, Harry," she said tearfully.

"Thanks for your faith in us, Harry," Fred said seriously. "It means a lot coming from you."

"There's nothing special about me," Harry muttered.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ginny said. "You are a natural-born leader. You say something and people listen, really listen. Okay, not Fudge or Umbridge, but they don't matter. Look at the DA. You taught us how to conjure Patroni. We survived a duel with Death Eaters who were at least twice our age, and had loads more dueling experience. Having faith in someone means a lot more when it comes from someone with that much influence. So don't ever say that there's nothing special about you. You, Harry James Potter, are a leader and a good man."

Harry blushed furiously. "Thanks," he whispered.

Ginny began to read again.

Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy, but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

"Once again, I'm announcing that I was an ass when I was eleven," Draco said firmly.

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.



“Never!” George said.

Fred continued sarcastically, “Yeah, when have Harry and Draco ever argued.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“Potter’s been sent a broomstick, Professor,” said Malfoy quickly.

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. “Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?”

“A Nimbus Two Thousand, sir,” said Harry, fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy’s face. “And it’s really thanks to Malfoy here that I’ve got it,” he added.

“Oh, the irony,” Sirius said blissfully, biscuit crumbs spraying from his mouth.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy’s obvious rage and confusion.

“Well it’s true,” Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, “If he hadn’t stolen Neville’s Rememberall I wouldn’t be on the team ...”

“So I suppose you think that’s a reward for breaking rules?” came an angry voice from just behind them.

“Sorry, Harry!”

“No problem, Hermione.”

Hermione was stomping up the stairs looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry’s hand.

“I thought you weren’t speaking to us?” said Harry.

“Yes, don’t stop now,” said Ron, “it’s doing us so much good.”

The Marauders burst into laughter.

“That...was...ruddy...brilliant,” James said around laughs.

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory, where his new broomstick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he’d be learning to play that night.

“We don’t blame you,” James and Sirius said together.

He bolted his dinner that evening without noticing what he was eating, and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

“Wow,” Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry’s bedspread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

All the men from the 1970s whimpered.

As seven o’clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. He’d never been inside the stadium before. Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the pitch so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

“Huh?” Sirius asked.

A small purple bottle appeared in front of him, and he opened it carefully. He pulled out a yellow stick.

“What does it do?” he muttered to himself.

“Here,” Lily said, taking it from him. “I’ll show you.” She dipped the stick into the bottle, and, pulling it out, blew gently through the hoop.

Bubbles floated out and moved around the room.

Sirius burst into laughter and clapped his hands like a toddler. “I wanna try,” he whined.

Lily handed it over, and Sirius spent the remainder of the chapter blowing bubbles...well...in between comments, anyway.

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling – he swooped in and out of the goalposts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his lightest touch.

Both of the older male Potters moaned in jealousy. Sirius was too distracted by all the bubbles.

“Hey, Potter, come down!”

Oliver Wood had arrived. He was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm. Harry landed next to him.

“Very nice,” said Wood, his eyes glinting. “I see what McGonagall meant ... you really are a natural. I’m just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you’ll be joining team practice three times a week.”

“That’s a fair number of practices each week,” James muttered. “Wood seems to know what he’s doing.”

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

“Right,” said Wood. “Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it’s not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers.”

“Three Chasers,” Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

“What’s a soccer ball?” Draco asked.

“It’s actually a football; it’s a black and white ball that Muggles use to play sports. Americans are the only ones who call it a soccer ball; they are so backwards,” Hermione explained.

“This ball’s called the Quaffle,” said Wood. “The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try to get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?”

“The Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score,” Harry recited. “So – that’s sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn’t it?”

“What’s basketball?” Draco asked.

Again, Hermione was the one who answered. “It’s a sport where the players bounce an orange ball against the ground as they move across the basketball court. There is a single hoop at each end that they have to try to score by throwing the ball through.”

“Oh!”

“What’s basketball?” said Wood curiously.

Everyone snickered.

“Never mind,” said Harry quickly.

“Now, there’s another player on each side who’s called the Keeper – I’m Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring.”

“Three Chasers, one Keeper,” said Harry, who was determined to remember it all. “And they play with the Quaffle. OK, got that. So what are they for?” he pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

“My son is so smart,” James whispered to Sirius who nodded in agreement.

“I’ll show you now,” said Wood. “Take this.”

He handed Harry a small club,

“Uh-oh,” Remus muttered, “Bludgers.”

...a bit like a short baseball bat.

“What’s baseball?” Draco asked.

“Another sport, but it’s too complicated to explain,” Hermione said in frustration.

“I’m going to show you what the Bludgers do,” Wood said. “These two are Bludgers.”

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

“They are,” the twins said.

“Stand back,” Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry’s face.

Lily gasped.

Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose, and sent it zigzagging away into the air – it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

“See?” Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely. “The Bludgers rocket around trying to knock players off their brooms. That’s why you have two Beaters on each team – the Weasley twins are ours – it’s their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So - think you’ve got all that?”

“He also told me that I’d make a fair Beater,” Harry commented idly.

“No way!” Fred yelled.

“You must’ve whacked it good if he said that!” George finished.

“My son is awesome!” James stated again.

“Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team,” Harry reeled off.

“Good memory,” Remus commented.

“Very good,” said Wood.

“Er – have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?” Harry asked, hoping he sounded offhand.

“Never at Hogwarts. We’ve had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the Seeker. That’s you. And you don’t have to worry about the Quaffle or the Bludgers –”

“– unless they crack my head open.”

“Don’t worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers – I mean, they’re like a pair of human Bludgers themselves.”

The twins stood and bowed to applause.

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

“This,” said Wood, “is the Golden Snitch, and it’s the most important ball of the lot. It’s very hard to catch because it’s so fast and difficult to see. It’s the Seeker’s job to catch it. You’ve got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers and Quaffle to get it before the other team’s Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they nearly always win. That’s why seekers get fouled so much. A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages – I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep.

“That’s because both Seekers in that game were bloody awful!” Charles said, “Honesty, you’d think that at least one of them would be able to spot it within a day, but NO. As I said, they were bloody awful!”

“Well, that’s it – any questions?”

“What is the meaning of life?”

Everyone stared at Sirius.

“What? It’s a valid question.”

“The meaning of life...is love,” Luna said. “Without it, life wouldn’t be worth living, at all.”

“Oh! Okay!” Sirius said, then went back to blowing bubbles.

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

Hermione laughed. “You’re the best Seeker Hogwarts has ever seen! Catching the Snitch is never going to be a problem for you.”

“We won’t practice with the Snitch yet,” said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, “it’s too dark, we might lose it. Let’s try you with a few of these.”

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket,

“What’s golf?”

“It’s a sport where people place a small white ball on a little stand, an inch or two high. Using a long, thin club, they hit the ball as far as they can in order to try to get it into a small hole in ground that’s a few inches big. The cup is quite a distance from where they start. The person who hits the ball the fewest times before getting it into the cup wins. People usually play on either nine fields or eighteen before the end of the game,” Hermione told Draco.

“Muggles are weird.”

...and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the ball as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Harry didn’t miss a single one, and Wood was delighted.

“Of course he was, he was throwing them one right after the other in all different directions. It wasn’t easy catching all of them before they hit the ground.

After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn’t carry on.



“That Quidditch Cup’ll have our name on it this year,” said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn’t gone off chasing dragons.”

“Insane,” James muttered.

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he’d already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had.

James and Lily both growled.

His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they’d seen him make Neville’s toad zoom around the classroom.

“I was so scared when he did that,” Neville muttered.

Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry’s partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye).

“Sorry, Neville,” Harry said, wincing.

“It’s not a problem, Harry,” Neville replied. “I was using Dad’s wand, after all. Gran is so proud of me for fighting the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries that she’s promised to buy me a new wand, one that chooses me.”

“That’s great, Neville!”

Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger.

It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too – never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

Sirius grinned maniacally. "Wingardium Lesiosa," he said, pointing his wand at the center of the table.

Suddenly a giant buffalo appeared on top of the table.

Arthur simply flicked his wand and it was gone. "Do that again, Sirius, and I will superglue your mouth shut."

"What's superglue?"

"It's a powerful liquid that works like a Permanent Sticking Charm," Lily explained, causing Sirius to pale.

"I won't do it again, sir," he said.

It was very difficult.

Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skywards just lay on the desktop.

"I guess you didn't inherit my talent at charms," Lily muttered.

"Actually, Mum," Harry said grinning, "I did manage a corporeal Patronus when I was thirteen, and I'm very good at summoning charms."

“I take back my previous comment.”

Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it – Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

“Well that would be why you were having trouble, not doing the proper wand movement,” Lily said.

“You're saying it wrong,” Harry heard Hermione snap. “It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long.”

“You were going to poke someone's eye out,” Hermione explained.

“You were rude, snapping at me like that,” Ron shot back.

Hermione huffed. “I never claimed to be a teacher! That's Harry!”

“You do it, then, if you're so clever,” Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand and said, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

“Well done!” Lily said.

“Oh, well done!” cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. “Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!”

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of the class.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her,” he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor. “She’s a nightmare, honestly.”

“You are!” Ron snapped.

Molly turned red. “Apologize to Hermione! Now! How a son of mine can be so rude, I’ll never know.”

“Sorry!” he said snidely.

“Honestly you two, after being friends for five years I would have expected you to be above such petty arguments,” Molly said.

“It wasn’t petty,” Ginny defended her best friend. “Ron insulted her intelligence one too many times. She ordered him to get away from her, so he and Fred switched seats. Then Ron had the gall to say that the only reason he puts up with her is because ‘they’re destined for each other’. He then implied that she couldn’t get a date with anyone else; he suggested Fred or George sarcastically. What Ron didn’t know is that Fred has had a crush on Hermione since she ordered him to stop testing products on the first years; and she’s liked him since she found out about the extendable ears. She admires the thought and hard work that went into creating them. Her crush got worse after the twins left Hogwarts though. She really admired him for standing up to Umbridge. So anyway, when Ron said that, Hermione climbed onto Fred’s lap and snogged him. McGonagall had to interrupt them so we could go on with the story.”

Hermione was beet red by the time Ginny was done talking.

“Good to know that the whole liking thing is mutual,” Fred whispered to Hermione.

Molly was simply beaming. “I’m going to get Hermione for a daughter-in-law!”

“We haven’t even had a first date, and she’s already planning a wedding!” Hermione said in an undertone to Fred.

“Just be thankful she hasn’t mentioned grand-kids yet,” he said back.

Thankfully, by this time Molly was berating Ron for being a rude, arrogant, self-centered, jerk, and so didn’t hear Fred and Hermione’s conversation. After all, they didn’t want to give her any ideas.

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face – and was startled to see that she was in tears.

“I think she heard you.”

“So?” said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Good!” Hermione said.

“She must’ve noticed she’s got no friends.”

“That much was true at the time,” she muttered sadly.

“But it’s not true anymore,” Harry said.

“Thanks.”

Hermione didn’t turn up for the next class and wasn’t seen all afternoon.

“Wow, you were upset, weren’t you?” Sirius asked rhetorically, “You’d have to be if you actually skived a class.”

On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls’ bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

“Shallow arse,” Fred muttered about his brother.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles and pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

“I’m hungry,” Sirius said loudly.

“Dear Merlin! Does he ever shut up!” Severus screamed.

“NO!” came from nearly everyone.

Mrs. Weasley pulled a large chocolate bar out of her bag and passed it down to Sirius. “Honestly,” she said, “you’ll never change; hungry all the time!”

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the Hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore’s chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, “Troll – in the dungeons – thought you ought to know.”

“Well of course I ought to know!” Albus said. “I have to get rid of it, don’t I. Why on earth did I hire that incompetent fool?”

“Damned if I know!” Harry said sharply, glaring at the Headmaster.

“Wait!” Mr. Weasley said loudly. “Wasn’t Quirrell the one who...” He indicated the back of his head.

“Yep, that would be Quirrell,” George confirmed.

“Yikes,” he said, shuddering violently. “That’s just creepy.”

“What was wrong with Quirrell’s head?” Minerva asked.

“You’ll find out later,” Harry said.

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

Sirius snickered.

There was uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore’s wand to bring silence.

“Prefects,” he rumbled, “lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!”

Percy was in his element.

“I’ll bet he was,” George muttered angrily.

“Follow me! Stick together, first-years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first-years coming through! Excuse me, I’m a Prefect!”

“Arrogant prat!” Fred snapped.

“Gee,” Sirius whispered to James, “D’you think they don’t like that fella?”

“No, I think they don’t like that fellow,” James replied.

Remus said, “Actually, you’re both wrong. They don’t like that fellow.”

“Will you three shut up!” Ree yelled.

“Yes, ma’am,” they said as one.

“How could a troll get in?” Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

“Don’t ask me, they’re supposed to be really stupid,” said Ron.

“This begs the question, ‘How did Crabbe and Goyle get in?’,” Draco asked.

“Their fathers probably bribed the Board of Governors,” Luna replied in a vague tone.

“That would do it. Please carry on, Ginny,” he said.

“Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke.”

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron’s arm.

“I’ve just thought – Hermione.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

“No problem, Hermione.”

“What about her?”

Molly smacked the back of Ron’s head.

“Sorry, Hermione,” he said in a sulky tone.

“She doesn’t know about the troll.”

Ron bit his lip.

“Oh, all right,” he snapped. “But Percy’d better not see us.”

“Lovely to know that you cared if another student was in danger,” George said sarcastically.

“Oh, yes. Especially your housemate,” Fred continued.



“You’re such a Slytherin,” Draco said. “How’d you get into Gryffindor in the first place?”

Ron turned pink but held his tongue.

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off towards the girls’ bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

“Percy!” hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

“Wrong!” Harry said.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

“What’s he doing?” Harry whispered. “Why isn’t he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?”

“Why indeed?” Snape said to himself.

“Search me.”

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape’s fading footsteps.

“He’s heading for the third floor,” Harry said,

“Ah!” Severus said, “The troll is a diversion.”

“Yeah, but just so you know, we thought you were after the stone at the time,” Harry said, blushing.

“Understandable, I do seem the type, don’t I?” he asked rhetorically.

…but Ron held up his hand.

“Can you smell something?”

“The troll,” Lily murmured

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

“Eewww!” all the girls said as one.

And then they heard it – a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed – at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

Everyone shuddered at the image.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

“Uh-oh,” Harry said, suddenly remembering what was coming.

“The key’s in the lock,” Harry muttered. “We could lock it in.”

“Good idea,” said Ron nervously.

“That was an excellent idea. It would save us all a lot of work,” Minerva said proudly. “It is an honor to have you in my house, Harry.”

“Erm, thanks, but it wasn’t as good an idea as it could have been.”

“Why’s that?”

Harry sighed. "You'll see."

They edged towards the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door and lock it.

"So far, so good," Minerva said in confusion.

"Wait for it..." Harry said.

"Yes!"

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop – a high, petrified scream – and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up.

"Oh, dear," Minerva murmured.

"Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"Bloody Baron," whimpered Sirius.

Remus began to rub his back again. "It's okay, Padfoot, he's not really there. Shhh."

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

"Hermione! Lily gasped.

"Hermione!" they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

“Why do I always freeze in stressful situations?” she moaned.

“Because you think too much instead of trusting your instincts,” Harry replied knowingly.

“Confuse it!” Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

“That won’t help,” James said.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise.

“I don’t believe it,” he said in shock, “it worked!”

Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

Lily paled.

And Sirius said, “Shit!”

“Oy, pea-brain!” yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn’t even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

“Pea-brain?” Draco questioned. “You couldn’t think of anything better?”

“It worked didn’t it,” Ron said.

“Come on, run, run!” Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn’t move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

“I don’t blame you,” Lily said shuddering.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll’s neck from behind.

“Woah,” Neville moaned.

The troll couldn’t feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry’s wand had still been in his hand when he’d jumped – it had gone straight up one of the troll’s nostrils.

“Eeeww,” everyone said together. That really was a disgusting thought.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand – not knowing what he was going to do, he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: “Wingardium Leviosa!”

“That won’t help,” Draco muttered. “You can’t think on your feet either, can you, Weasley?”

“Just wait,” Ron said.

The club flew suddenly out of the troll’s hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over – and dropped, with a sickening crack,

onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

"I take that back. Sorry, Weasley."

"No problem, Malfoy."

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it – dead?"

"Well, is it?" Sirius asked bouncing up and down from eating too much sugar.

"If you'd only shut up, we could find out!" Snape hissed dangerously.

Sirius cringed in fear.

"I don't think so," said Harry. "I think it's just been knocked out."

"Yeah...that crack was the sound of a concussion, not a crushed skull," Harry commented.

"How do you know the difference between the sounds of the cracks?" Charles asked.

"My uncle has given me a lot of concussions. I learned quickly what they sound like."

Both of the elder Potters glared at Dumbledore. "The Muggle is going to die," Charles hissed.

"Or..." George began.

"We could always," continued Fred.

“Give him a fate worse than death,” Ginny finished before George could open his mouth.

“What kind of a fate?” Ree asked.

“Torture,” George said. “By way of pranks that will eventually turn the mans mind to mush.”

Ree looked at her husband. “I’m thinking of #420: ‘Dirt Defiance’.”

“Huh?” Harry asked.

“No matter how hard they scrub, their house will only get dirtier.”

“I like it!” Ginny said. The twins nodded in agreement, and George made a note in his ever-present notebook.

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll’s nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy grey glue.

“Yuck!” nearly everyone yelled.

“Urgh – troll bogies.”

He wiped it on the troll’s trousers.

“I hope you disinfected it later,” Lily said, her face a little green.

“No,” Fred answered for him. “Percy did it for him.”

“Yeah,” said George. “The only good thing he ever did.”

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn’t realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll’s roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape,

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Lily said in relief.

...with Quirrell bringing up the rear.

“Aw, shit...not the pansy,” James moaned.

“Pansy?” Neville asked.

“It’s a term for someone who’s a wimp,” Hermione explained.

“Ah, that kinda makes sense.”

Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

“Die, die, die...” Harry muttered. He paused for a moment, then an evil smirk appeared on his face. “Oh, wait...he did.”

Severus arched a brow, and began to observe Harry more closely.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry’s mind.

“I should damn well hope they did,” she snapped.

“Indeed,” Severus agreed.

“What on earth were you thinking of?” said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice.

“How could her voice be cold? Voices can’t have temperatures,” Sirius said in confusion.

“It means her voice was very angry towards them,” Luna explained.



“Oookaay?”

Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. “You’re lucky you weren’t killed. Why aren’t you in your dormitory?”

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

“Please, Professor McGonagall – they were looking for me.”

“Good idea,” Lily said. “Tell the truth.”

“Miss Granger!”

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

“I went looking for the troll because I – I thought I could deal with it on my own – you know, because I’ve read all about them.”

“That’s it,” Sirius said. “Lie through your teeth.”

“That is the biggest load of hippogriff dung I have ever heard,” Severus said incredulously, “and as Head of Slytherin, I’ve heard a lot of it.”

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher?

“Amazing didn’t it,” Fred said wrapping an arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “Our Hermione, all grown up and lying to the professors.”

Hermione blushed.

“If they hadn’t found me, I’d be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn’t have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they had arrived.”

“Well, at least that much was the truth,” Minerva said.

Harry and Ron tried to look as if this story wasn't new to them.

“A difficult feat, I'm sure,” Draco muttered.

“Well – in that case ...” said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, “Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?”

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble.

“That's a great description of her, ‘the last person to do anything against the rules’,” George said.

“Actually,” Hermione corrected him, “that would be Neville.”

“Good point.”

It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

Ginny shuddered. “Scary image, that.”

“Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this,” said Professor McGonagall.

“ONLY FIVE POINTS! Are you insane?” Severus yelled.

“She was only eleven, and had been in school for barely two months. If it were a Slytherin, you would have given them points for bravery,” Minerva defended.

“Oh. Well, I can't argue with that.”

“I'm very disappointed in you. If you are not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses.”

Hermione left.

“Quickly too,” Harry said.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

“Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first-years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go.”

“You just gave them points for stupidity!” Snape snapped.

Minerva glared at her colleague. “I gave them points for caring enough to risk their lives to save someone else's.”

“Damnit! Why can I never beat you?”

She smirked. “Because you're not smart enough?” she suggested.

He gave her a rude gesture.

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

“Yeah, it was,” Ron said

“We should have got more than ten points,” Ron grumbled.

“Hah!” Severus burst. “That's funny!”

“Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's.”

“Good of her to get us out of trouble like that,” Ron admitted. “Mind you, we did save her.”

“You are an arrogant prat!” Hermione snapped.

“She might not have needed saving if we hadn’t locked the thing in with her,” Harry reminded him.

“That’s my boy,” Lily said proudly.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Agnes!” Sirius cried out suddenly.

“What?” Molly asked.

“Well, apparently,” Harry said, “My godfather is quite the ladies man and knows every female in the castle quite well.”

“Oh my!”

“It’s no bed of roses though,” Sirius said. “Have you ever had a statue pinch your butt? It hurts!”

Harry burst into laughter.

“Pig snout,” they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them.

“Why?” James asked Sirius, who couldn’t possibly be expected to know the answer.

Sirius shrugged and continued to blow his bubbles.

There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said “Thanks”, and hurried off to get plates.

“Aw,” Lily said. “They’re so cute.”

Harry stared at his mother. “Is she always like this?” he asked James.

“Oh, yes, always!” James replied.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can’t share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

“It is?” Sirius asked.

“Obviously,” Luna said, “otherwise they wouldn’t have been friends for the past five years.”

“Oh, okay,” he said happily. He went to blow more bubbles, but couldn’t. He lifted the little purple bottle up, and, tilting his head back, looked up – and into it. “OUCH!” he cried out. A single drop of the liquid had dripped into his eye. “I’m out of bubbly!” He pouted.

10 points if you can find the hidden movie reference, and tell me what it was from.

Polls are up! Please vote.

“It’s my turn!” Hermione said excitedly.

Ron groaned.

Suddenly, three people appeared out of nowhere.

The tall, skinny blonde screamed shrilly.

“ I need more firewhiskey,” Severus muttered. A small bottle appeared in front of him. He gazed at it critically but then decided that it wouldn’t be worth the effort to complain.

“YOU!” she screamed pointing at Harry. “WHAT DID YOU DO?”

Harry stood suddenly, his chair falling in his haste. “Sit down and shut up,” he said in a voice that was dangerously low. His eyes glowed like the Killing Curse, and he radiated power, an unnatural wind blowing around them.

Three more chairs appeared in between Moera’s chair, and Draco’s.

The family of three shuffled over to the chairs in a group, never taking their eyes off of Harry.

“You will,” his voice rang with authority, “behave like civilized human beings, and if you misbehave I promise that what I do to you will make Dudley’s pig tail look like a freckle. Now! Sit and listen!”

The three paled and chose to keep their mouths shut.

“Good,” Harry said briskly. “Everyone meet the Dursleys. Dursleys meet Severus, Albus, Minerva, Lily, James, Sirius, Remus, Ginny, Hermione, Fred, Neville, Ron, Molly, Arthur, Charles, Ree, George, Luna, and Draco.”

Petunia Dursley paled. “Lily? Severus?”

Lily went red. She whipped out her wand, but before she could utter a spell, Minerva had confiscated it.

“Honestly, trying to do magic on a Muggle. You know the law Miss Evans,” Minerva said in a sharp tone.

“Sorry,” Lily said in a small voice, and began to cry. “She hurt my baby,” she wailed.

Ree began to watch the young witch with a discerning look on her face. She pulled a small notebook out of her bag and began to write something down.

“Shall we begin then,” Hermione said in a perky tone.

## Chapter Eleven: Quidditch

“What’s Quidditch?” Dudley said in a confused tone.

“Wizarding sport,” Harry replied tersely.

Dudley shuddered. “MU-UM, he said that word again!” he whined.

Harry arched a brow. “I’m going to warn you Dudley. You and your parents are the only non magical people in this room. The rest of the people are either: my friends, family, or nearly friends, so you would do well not to anger them.”

Dudley turned gray.

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy grey and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows, defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaver skin boots.

The Quidditch season had begun.

“Yes!” James and Sirius yelled punching the air.

On Saturday, Harry would be playing in his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin.

“Kick their arses, Harry!” James cried out.

If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the House Championship.

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret.

“The problem with that is,” George explained, “that if it’s a secret, the whole school knows.”

“Too right,” Harry agreed.

But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn’t know which was worse - people telling him he’d be brilliant or people telling him they’d be running around underneath him, holding a mattress.

“See! Everyone knows!” George said matter-of-factly.

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermione as a friend. He didn’t know how he’d have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do.

“Did I ever thank you for that, Hermione?” he asked.

“No.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you.”

“Your welcome, Harry,” she said smiling.

She had also lent him Quidditch Through the Ages, which turned out to be a very interesting read.



“Of course it is!” James said in shock. “You mean you never read it before?”

“I’ll say this one last time,” Harry said, carefully enunciating each word, “I. Grew. Up. With. Muggles.”

“Oh,” James blushed, “Oops.”

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul

Dudley’s jaw dropped. “Seven hundred?” he whispered in shock.

…and that all of them happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them;

“You mean you could have died that year, and somehow didn’t manage it!” Vernon yelled in shock.

“I told you,” Harry said to Hermione. “They’d be disappointed that with all of the opportunities I had to die, I still managed to survive.”

“Damn!” she snapped, and reached into her pocket, pulled out a galleon and tossed it to Harry.

…that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

“Hey!” Charles said. “I only did it once during a pick-up game! It was an accident! I can’t help it if I’m not very good at apparating!”

“That was you!” Ron said, his eyes going wide.

Charles blushed

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll and she was much nicer for it.

“I am so disappointed in you,” Lily moaned, shaking her head.

At the same time, Fred said, “I am so proud of you.” He beamed at Hermione who was blushing.

The day before Harry’s first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire which could be carried around in a jam jar.

“You could do that in your first year!” Remus said impressed. “I LOVE YOU!” He suddenly turned bright red.

Harry decided to have some fun with this. “Nymphadora will be heartbroken!”

“Huh?” Remus said in confusion.

Harry grinned. “Nymphadora Tonks. Your girlfriend. Sirius’ cousin.”

“I – I – I mean...it was a figure of speech.”

“Yeah. Sure,” Harry said sarcastically, smirking.

They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm, when Snape crossed the yard. Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping.

Severus arched a brow in curiosity.

Harry, Ron and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn’t be allowed.

“The only rules about not using magic are the ones about not performing it in corridors, and not dueling,” Lily said, sounding as though she’d swallowed a rule book.

Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye.

Snape smirked. "I've still got it," he said to himself.

He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

"Severus."

"Yes, Lily?"

"Run." She grabbed James' wand from his pocket and began to throw curses at Severus.

He paled as he dogged some nasty looking hexes.

Ree pulled out her notebook and began to write again, ignoring the jets of light flying around the room, several barely missing her.

Remus suddenly stood and petrified Lily. He walked over to her and pulled James' wand from her hand and handed it back to James. "I'll release you if you promise not to hex anyone. Blink if you agree."

She did so he released her, and they sat back down.

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," said Snape. "Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

"You made that up!" Minerva snapped.

Severus cringed. "I'm sorry," he said shrinking in his seat.

"Fine...but this isn't over," she said, glaring at him

“He’s just made that rule up,” Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away.

“My son is so smart,” Lily said, beaming with pride.

Ree wrote something else down.

“Wonder what’s wrong with his leg?”

“Dunno, but I hope it’s really hurting him,” said Ron bitterly.

“You and I are having a little chat when we get home,” Molly told Ron with a look that boded no good for him.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron and Hermione sat together next to a window. Hermione was checking Harry and Ron’s Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy (“How will you learn?”), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

“That’s my boy,” James said, puffing up his chest with pride.

Hermione cast a glare at Harry.

“I’m sorry that we took advantage of your friendship by trying to cheat off of you,” Harry said.

Molly glared at Ron, who sighed and said, “Sorry, Mione.”

“My name is Hermione. Harry, you’re forgiven.”

Ron fumed silently.

Harry felt restless. He wanted Quidditch Through the Ages back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow.

Why should he be afraid of Snape?

“Because I’ve killed more people than you could possibly imagine,” Snape said calmly.

Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was going to ask Snape if he could have it.

“Rather you than me,” they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn’t refuse if there were other teachers listening.

“Damn!” Severus hissed. “The brat figured it out.” Even though what he said would make him seem mad, there was no venom in his words.

He made his way down to the staff room and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

“Damn!” Sirius said.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try.

“You are brave,” Neville said in awe.

He pushed the door ajar and peered inside – and a horrible scene met his eyes.

“Snape was having sex!” Sirius screamed.

The man in question glared at him.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone.

“SEE!” he screamed even louder than before.

If looks could kill, Sirius would be dead.

Snape was holding his robes above his knees.

“OH, THE MENTAL IMAGERY!”

“SHUT UP!” Severus screamed. A bottle of firewhiskey appeared in front of him. He downed half of it in one gulp.

One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

“Oh. Well, that’s a relief,” Sirius said in a small voice.

“Blasted thing,” Snape was saying. “How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?”

“What were you doing on the third floor?” James asked.

“Checking to make sure that no one had gotten past Fluffy,” Harry explained for Severus.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, dad!” he replied in a monotone.

“Dad?” Dudley asked. “Your dad is dead, Potter. And this bloke is only a year or two older than us.”

“He is my dad, brought from the past to read this story, now...SHUT UP!”

Dudley shrank in his seat.

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but –

“Uh-oh,” Remus said.

” POTTER!”

“Busted,” Draco said in a sing-song voice.

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"Wow!" Lily said. "Even I'm not brave enough to dare his anger...and I'm his best friend!"

Harry smirked.

"GET OUT! OUT!"

Harry left, before Snape could take anymore points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?"

In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when we saw him – he's after whatever it's guarding! And I'd bet my broomstick he let that troll in, to create a diversion!"

"I'm glad no one took that bet," Harry said. "I would've lost."

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No – he wouldn't," she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

Snape smirked and said to Hermione, "If you were ten or twenty years older..." he trailed off.

She paled.

“Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something,” snapped Ron. “I’m with Harry. I wouldn’t put anything past Snape.”

Snape looked quite pleased with himself.

But what’s he after? What’s the dog guarding?”

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same question. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn’t sleep. He tried to empty his mind – he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours – but the expression on Snape’s face when Harry had seen his leg wasn’t easy to forget.

“I think you wanted to murder me,” Harry said shuddering.

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

“Ah...bliss,” Sirius said, a dreamy smile on his face.

“You’ve got to eat some breakfast.”

“I don’t want anything.”

Molly turned pink.

“Just a bit of toast,” wheedled Hermione.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Ginny,” she snapped. “You’re in charge of making him eat properly from now on! He’s much too skinny.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ginny said dutifully, already planning on it.



Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Real nice guy, this Seamus bloke," James said conversationally.

"Yeah," Remus agreed. "He's a really good inspirational speaker."

"Brilliant even," Sirius tossed in his opinion. The sad thing was that Sirius was being serious.

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

"I think I'm going to be ill," Lily said.

Ree made a notation in her notebook.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

"Especially during a monsoon," Hermione said, thinking of third year.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined.

Ron shuddered. "Rat – scared – evil – die."

It said Potter for President and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

"That's a third year charm," Minerva said in shock.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

“Okay, men,” George began.

“Okay, men,” he said.

“And women,” Fred continued.

“And women,” said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

“This is it,” George continued.

“And women,” Wood agreed. “This is it.”

“The big one,” said Fred.

“The big one,” said Fred Weasley.

“The one we’ve all been waiting for,” George said.

“The one we’ve all been waiting for,” said George.

“We know Oliver’s speech by heart,” Fred explained to everyone.

“We know Oliver’s speech by heart,” Fred told Harry. “We were in the team last year.”

Everyone, who had been mildly amused up to this point, burst into laughter.

“Shut up, you two,” said Wood. “This is the best team Gryffindor’s had in years. We’re going to win. I know it.”

“Harry’s never let us down,” said George.

He glared at them as if to say, “Or else.”

“Quidditch Nazi,” Hermione muttered causing several eyebrows to raise.

“Right. It’s time. Good luck, all of you.”

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his knees weren’t going to give way, walked on to the pitch to loud cheers.

“Ah, memories,” Charles said with a reminiscent look on his face.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field, waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

“Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you,” she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin captain, Marcus Flint, a sixth year.

“She was,” Fred explained, “Flint is known for playing dirty.”

Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him.

“He does.” Malfoy shuddered. “His family is known for...experimenting.”

Everyone shuddered.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

“Wait...You’re brave enough to stand up to Severus when he’s mad, but you’re scared of a Quidditch match?” Lily asked incredulously.

“Snape is less scary than Uncle Vernon when his face is purple, but I just couldn’t let the school down,” Harry explained.

Lily glared at Vernon, and began muttering under her breath.

Ree’s notebook made another appearance.

“Mount your brooms, please.”

Harry clambered on to his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

“YES!” the Marauders yelled.

“And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor – what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too – ”

“Man, he’s an awesome announcer!” Sirius proclaimed.

“JORDAN!”

“McGonagall,” Neville said.

“Sorry, Professor.”

“No he wasn’t,” Hermione said smiling.

The Weasley twins’ friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

“That explains it all,” Minerva moaned. “I’m doomed.”

Everyone laughed.

“And she’s really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood’s, last year only a reserve – back to Johnson and – no, Slytherin have taken the Quaffle,

The boys all leaned forward in excitement, even Dudley.

Slytherin captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes - Flint flying like an eagle up there – he’s going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and Gryffindors take the Quaffle – that’s Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and – OUCH –

Everyone winced.

...that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger –

“That had to have hurt,” Luna said dreamily.

Quaffle taken by Slytherin – that’s Adrian Pucey

“He’s hot,” Hermione said idly, causing Fred to give her a strange look.

...speeding off towards the goalposts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger –

“GO WEASLEYS!” Sirius yelled like a cheerleader.

...sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which – nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes – she's really flying –

“She's brilliant, isn't she?” George said in pride.

“Is she your girlfriend,” Molly asked innocently.

“Yes,” George said, forgetting for a moment that it had been his mother who asked the question. When he realized, he paled.

“That's three boys, now. Fred, George, and Bill, but there's still hope yet for Charlie and Ron.”

“Hope yet for what, Mum?” Ron asked.

“Marriage, of course,” Molly said, simply beaming.

All three Weasley boys paled.

...dodges a speeding Bludger – the goalposts are ahead – come on, now, Angelina – Keeper Bletchley dives – misses – GRYFFINDORS SCORE!”

The Marauders cheered.

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

“Budge up there, move along.”

“Hagrid!” Ron and Neville cried together.

“Hagrid!”

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid space to join them.

“Bin’ watchin’ from me hut,” said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars round his neck, “But it isn’t the same as bein’ in the crowd. No sigh of the Snitch yet, eh?”

“I agree with Hagrid,” Ree said. “There’s nothing like sitting in the stands surrounded by the crowd, cheering wildly.” Her face was flushed with excitement, and Charles was staring at her in unabashed admiration.

“Nope,” said Ron. “Harry hasn’t had much to do yet.”

“Kept outta trouble, though, that’s somethin’,” said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skywards at the speck that was Harry.

“True statement!” Charles said. “That’s important for a Seeker.”

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

“Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch,” Wood had said. “We don’t want you attacked before you have to be.”

“Nice, common sense, practical advice,” James said.

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let out his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasley’s wrist watches,

“You realized that! From that distance!” Fred said.

Harry nodded.

“Wow!”

...and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

“How’d Rowling know it was me? It coulda been George.”

“Dunno,” George said, “strange that.”

“All right there, Harry?” he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously towards Marcus Flint.

“Slytherin in possession,”

Lee Jordan was saying. “Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys and Chaser Bell

“GO WEASLEYS!” Sirius cheered again.

...and speeds towards the – wait a moment – was that the Snitch?”

“GO HARRY!” James cheered.

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

“Okay, he’s thick, but that doesn’t make him any less hot,” Hermione said.

Fred stared.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downwards after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled towards the Snitch – all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.



“Idiots!” Draco proclaimed, snorting in disgust.

Harry was faster than Higgs –

“Well, duh!” Ron muttered.

...he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead – he put on an extra spurt of speed –

WHAM!

Everyone jumped.

A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below – Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry’s broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

Lily gasped loudly.

Another notation was made.

“Foul!” screamed the Gryffindors.

Including James and Sirius.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goalposts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

“Damn,” said Remus.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, “Send him off, ref! Red card!”

“What?” Draco said in confusion.

“What are you talking about, Dean?” said Ron

“Red card!” said Dean furiously. “In soccer you get shown the red card and you’re out of the game!”

“But this isn’t soccer, Dean,” Ron reminded him.

“But they should do it in Quidditch. It’s dangerous enough as it is!” Lily exclaimed.

Hagrid however was on Dean’s side.

” They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air.”

“Too right!” Lily said.

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

“I don’t blame him!” Sirius said, a frown marring his normally smooth face.

“So – after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating – ”

“Jordan!” growled Professor McGonagall.

“Once again I say...you are a cat!” Sirius snapped.

“Keep your yap shut, barky!” she snapped back.

His jaw fell open in shock as Hermione continued to read.

“I mean, after that open and revolting foul – ”

“Jordan, I’m warning you – ”

“But it was!” Sirius whined.

“All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I’m sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession.”

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger which went spinning dangerously past his head that it happened.

“WHAT! WHAT!” Sirius said beginning to bite his nails before he realized what he was doing and pulled out a nail file instead.

His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he though he was going to fall.

“NO!” Lily screamed.

“Hold everything,” Ree told Hermione. “I’d like a moment alone with Lily.”

The two red heads stepped over to one side of the room and began to talk in whispers.

After about fifteen minutes, Ree reached into her bag and pulled out a potion bottle which she handed to Lily. Lily downed it, and they returned to the story.

“You may go on now, Hermione,” Ree said, smiling brightly.

He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He’d never felt anything like that.

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off.

Remus was suddenly very alert. “Someone’s jinxing his broom.”

But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off. Harry tried to turn back towards the Gryffindor goalposts –

he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out – and then he realized that the broom was completely out of his control.

James paled but didn't say a word.

He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zig-zagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements which almost unseated him.

Sirius had very little left to his nails, now.

Lee was still commentating.

“Slytherin in possession – Flint with the Quaffle – passes Spinnet – passes Bell – hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose – only joking, Professor – Slytherins score – oh no...”

James had grabbed Sirius' spare nail file and was now filing his own nails.

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely. It was carrying him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

Lily was still pale, but wasn't having any outbursts. She snatched the nail file out of Sirius' hands and began to file her own nails.

“Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing,” Hagrid mumbled. He stared through his binoculars. “If I didn' know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom ... but he can't have ...”

“Again...His broom is jinxed,” Remus mumbled.

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on.

“Quidditch prodigy,” James said to his father who nodded seriously.

Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry’s broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

“Oh, Harry,” Lily said.

“Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?” Seamus whispered.

“Can’t have,” Hagrid said, his voice shaking. “Can’t nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark Magic – no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand.”

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid’s binoculars, but instead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

“Smart girl,” Lily declared.

“What are you doing?” moaned Ron, grey-faced.

“She’s looking for whoever jinxed his broom,” Remus answered.

” I knew it,” Hermione gasped. “Snape – look.”

“I was the logical choice. No doubt I was saying the counter-jinx, and that’s why you thought it was me who was cursing him,” Severus said.

“I am sorry though,” Hermione said, but he just waved her off.

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was muttering nonstop under his breath.

“He’s doing something – jinxing the broom,” said Hermione.

“What should we do?”

“Leave it to me.”

“I’m really, really sorry,” Hermione moaned.

“Oh, come on,” Snape said, “Buck up, girl. It’s not like you set fire to me or anything.”

Hermione turned beet red. “Actually...” she trailed off.

Severus burst into laughter. “You have guts; I’ll give you that. Bloody Gryffindor,” he said good-naturedly.

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good – every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell.

“At least someone is looking out for Harry,” Lily said.

Marcus Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

“Typical Slytherin,” Sirius muttered, at which Draco smirked.

“Come on, Hermione,” Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn’t even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front.

“Ahah! Quirrell is the one who is jinxing Harry’s broom,” Severus said, sounding as though he’d just figured out the meaning of life.

Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well-chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand on to the hem of Snape's robes.

“Brilliant witch,” Severus muttered.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket she scrambled back along the row – Snape would never know what had happened.

“I know now!”

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom.

“GO HARRY!” Charles yelled, sounding like his son.

“Neville, you can look!” Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid’s jacket for the last five minutes.

All the girls “awed” at this.

“Wow, Nev, I never knew you cared,” Harry teased his friend.

“Shut up, Harry,” Neville said, grinning at his friend.

Harry was speeding towards the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick – he hit the pitch on all fours – coughed – and something gold fell into his hand.

“You caught the Snitch with your mouth?” Remus asked.

“Yes.”

“Wow! You do do things in style.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve got the Snitch!” he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

“It is a first,” James said with the air of someone who knew undoubtedly that he was right.

“He didn’t catch it, he nearly swallowed it,” Flint was still howling twenty minutes later, but it made no difference – Harry hadn’t broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the result – Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty.

“YES!” Sirius yelled leaping into the air.

Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a strong cup of tea back in Hagrid’s hut, with Ron and Hermione.

“Good ole’ Hagrid,” Ginny said, beaming about their large friend.

“It was Snape,” Ron was explaining. “Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“You know,” Luna said, “that sounded very stalker-ish.”

Snape flushed.

“Rubbish,” said Hagrid, who hadn’t heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. “Why would Snape do somethin’ like that?”

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

“It’s always a good idea to tell the truth,” Lily said, and Molly nodded.



“I found out something about him,” he told Hagrid. “He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it’s guarding.”

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

“How do you know about Fluffy?” he said.

“Fluffy,” the Marauders snickered. Fred and George did as well.

“Fluffy?”

“Yeah – he’s mine – bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las’ year – I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the – ”

“Oh, Hagrid, he just cannot seem to keep a secret,” Dumbledore moaned.

“Yes?” said Harry eagerly.

“Now, don’t ask me any more,” said Hagrid gruffly. “That’s top secret, that is.”

“But Snape’s trying to steal it.”

Snape snickered.

“Rubbish,” said Hagrid again. “Snape’s a Hogwarts teacher, he’d do nothin’ of the sort.”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” Severus said.

“So why did he just try and kill Harry?” cried Hermione.

The afternoon’s events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

“Unfortunately, it won’t be the last time that happens,” Ron muttered.

“Gee Weasley. I’m beginning to think that you don’t like me.”

Ron made a rude gesture, and his mother said, “Lower that finger or I’ll chop it off.”

Ron paled and did as she demanded.

” I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I’ve read all about them! You’ve got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn’t blinking at all, I saw him!”

Snape grinned. “Brilliant witch,” he muttered again.

“I’m tellin’ yeh, yer wrong!” said Hagrid hotly. “I don’ know why Harry’s broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn’ try an’ kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh – yer meddlin’ in things that don’ concern yeh. It’s dangerous. You forget that dog, an’ you forget what it’s guardin’, that’s between Professor Dumbledore an’ Nicolas Flamel –”

“He didn’t know us very well at that point,” Harry commented.

“Aha!” said Harry. “So there’s someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?”

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

“He’s looked that way many times,” Minerva said.

Hermione sighed in relief. “That’s me done! Fred’s turn is next.” She handed the book to him.

“This is gonna be fun!” he declared with a glint in his eye that terrified his mother.

They all took a break to stretch their legs and some of the men approached Harry.

James grinned at his son. "Son, it's time we had a little...Talk."

Harry gulped involuntarily.

10 points: Name what movie Hagrid was in with George Clooney.

Harry was dead, dead as a doornail.

The only problem was that doornails were never alive to begin with, and Harry was. At least, he thought he was. Right now, he wasn't really sure of anything.

He was surrounded by men, including: Dumbledore, Snape, the Marauders, all of the Weasley men, Charles, and Draco.

Wait a second... "Why are you here, anyway, Draco?"

"Are you kidding me, Potter?" Draco asked incredulously, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "I wouldn't miss this for all the galleons in Gringotts."

Harry groaned.

James began to grin maniacally. "Well, Son, as I said, we are going to have a little talk...Well...to be perfectly honest..."

Sirius grinned evilly.

"...we are going to have THE TALK." James waggled his eyebrows.

Harry groaned again.

"I'll begin, seeing as I've had the most experience giving The Talk out of all of us," Arthur said, smiling. "Now, Harry, I can't be a hypocrite and tell you not to have sex before marriage..."

George interrupted. "Yeah, Bill was born four months after their wedding, and believe me, Harry, Bill was no preemie."

"As I was saying," Arthur continued. "If you and Ginny," he shuddered here, "do...erm...consummate the relationship, you need to know the Contraceptive Charm. Because, Merlin knows Molly would murder you if Ginny became pregnant before marriage. So I'm going to teach it to you."

“Perhaps...” Charles said, “I should be the one to teach him. No offense, Arthur, but you do have seven children.”

“Exactly. None of them have given me grandchildren yet either. Just because I forgot to do the charm a time or four doesn’t mean that I can’t do it, right.”

And so began The Great Argument of Weasley vs. Potter. It was a fierce battle to the...well...not death per se...more like to-the-wrestling-around-on-the-floor-like-Fred-and-George-when-they-were-five.

The fight lasted until...

“I already know the charm.”

“Come again,” the Weasley boys glared at Harry.

Harry blushed. “I haven’t needed it or anything, but Sirius insisted on teaching it to me during the last Christmas holidays.”

Sirius beamed.

“What a relief,” James said, sighing. “Sirius is really good at that charm...he’s used it often enough.”

“Look, guys,” Harry said to the Weasleys, “I’m not planning on having sex until I’m married anyway. I saw way too many Muggle teens getting pregnant in Little Whinging. Besides, Ginny would castrate me if I tried. She threatened Justin Finch-Fletchley with it after he tried to grope her for the third time in one day.”

“He’s a dead man,” Ron growled.

Harry smirked. “You’re too late. He’s not dead...he just wishes he was...Someone hexed him so bad that he makes Marietta Edgecombe look like a goddess.”

“Harry?” Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes sparkling. “You wouldn’t have had anything to do with his...problem...now, would you?”

Harry grinned evilly. “There’s no proof,” was his only response.

“Go Harry!” the Marauders yelled, high-fiving each other.

“I knew I wouldn’t want to miss this,” Draco said blissfully as he walked back over to the table.

As the rest of the men wandered off, Sirius sidled up to Harry and asked, “So when I gave you The Talk did I tell you about...”

Twenty minutes later, a very red-faced Harry sat down at the table and buried his head in his arms. “When I get home, I am under orders to erect a headstone in the Godric’s Hollow cemetery, in the Potter family plot no less, that says ‘Sirius Black, sex god’,” he told Ginny, looking as though he was either going to be violently ill, or cry.

Ginny couldn’t help giggling. “At least all of the women he dated will have a place to mourn him.”

“But Ginny, he’s my godfather...he’s supposed to be a eunuch. It’s nearly as bad as thinking about my parents, or worse, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon doing...it.”

Remus plopped down on Harry’s other side. “So, Harry...Did I just hear you mention Sirius and eunuch in the same sentence?” He said this so loud that the whole room heard them.

“WHAT!” screamed Sirius. “I am NOT a eunuch!”

“I never said that you were,” Harry explained. Then he muttered, “You just should be is all.”

Sirius was just about to open his mouth to make a retort, when...

“Oh! My! God! You’re Sirius Black!” Petunia screamed shrilly.

“I told you, Remus,” Sirius grinned, “All women know me. I am a legend.”

“Hmph,” Petunia muttered, “what you are is a convicted murderer.”

“WHAT! I’m too sexy to be in Azkaban!”

“Relax, Padfoot, you’re innocent. They sent you to prison without a trial, and you escaped when I was thirteen,” Harry said, looking depressed as he remembered that the Sirius from his time was dead.

“Wait a minute...Do you mean to tell me that I am the first person to ever escape Azkaban?” Sirius asked, wide eyed.

“Well, you were the first that they noticed had escaped. The first one ever escaped when his Polyjuiced mother took his place. She died within a month so no one caught on.”

“Hmph, sending a man to prison without a trial,” Petunia said incredulously, “Your kind are totally barbaric.” She looked straight at Harry.

He simply arched a brow in a scarily good imitation of Severus and gave her The Look of Doom. All of the Gryffindors had been confronted with that look at some point during their school years. Some NEWT students had actually wet their pants when confronted with it. It was a look that said, ‘You just did the stupidest thing of your life, and when I’m through with you, you’ll wish that Filch had gotten his wish and hung you in the dungeon by your toes’.

Petunia’s face turned grey.

Harry smirked when she practically flew around the table to her seat.

At last, they were ready to begin the next chapter.

Chapter Twelve: The Mirror Of Erised

Fred read in a snooty tone of voice, making his twin snicker.

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow.

“The castle woke up? I didn’t know that buildings could do that,” Dudley said in awe.

Everyone snickered.

“It was a figure of speech. It means, ‘when everyone in the castle woke up’,” Luna explained.

Dudley looked confused. “Then why didn’t they just say that.”

“I agree,” Sirius said, then looked horrified for agreeing with the whale.

The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban.

Hermione beamed. “I love you,” she said, throwing herself into Fred’s arms and kissing him.

“No, I love you,” Sirius said dreamily. “You agree with torturing a professor!” He jumped into the air and yelled, “Yahoo!”

Hermione finally came up for air, and blushed at what Sirius had said.

“Out of curiosity,” Minerva asked, her Scottish accent getting thicker, “why are you happy that he disrespected a professor? You just don’t seem the type to enjoy that sort of thing.”

“She’s not,” Harry and Ron said in unison and, incidentally, in bored tones.

“I normally don’t condone such behavior,” Hermione glared at Ron and Harry, who had rarely shown respect to Snape, “but as it’s Quirrell, well...you’ll find out why at the end of the book, I’m sure.”



The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver post had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the draughty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worse of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

Severus winced. "I didn't realize that it bothered people that much. This Christmas, the fireplaces will be used."

"THANK YOU!" the students chimed together, Draco included.

Fred continued.

"I do feel sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

"I. Was. An. Ass," the aforementioned ass muttered.

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them.

"Good for you," Lily said smiling.

"Sticks and Stones," Luna sang.

"No way? Wizards know that rhyme too?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Of course, Ichabod the Illiterate was the man, er, being who came up with that saying. He was half goblin, you see, and he often said that to those who teased him for his heritage. One day someone took him literally and began to beat him with sticks and stones," Luna was

the one who responded, but Draco, nodding in agreement, made her more believable.

Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he'd realized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick.

"Good!" James said, casting Draco a dirty look.

So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.

Draco blushed.

"What do they mean, NO PROPER FAMILY, BOY?" Vernon Dursley yelled. He had obviously begun to believe that Harry had been bluffing earlier when he threatened them. "YOU ARE AN..."

But they never got to find out what Harry was.

The young man had simply waved his hand, silencing his uncle's yells.

"Calm down," he said in an even tone of voice. "You're going to give yourself a heart attack at this rate."

Vernon's red face slowly faded to its natural pink tone.

"What they mean by 'no proper family' is that proper families are made up of people who love you," Harry explained.

"Hmph, we took you in, fed you, clothed you, we were better to you than you deserved," Petunia snapped waspishly.

Harry raised a hand for the others to keep silent and to let him handle this. "Aunt Petunia, look into my eyes, and listen closely."

Petunia did as he told her, though she clearly didn't want to.

"I was one year old when my parents were murdered. Imagine for a moment that you and Uncle Vernon were murdered. Dudley had to go live with 'our kind'," he indicated the rest of the table. "It wasn't Dudley's fault. He was a baby. The only reason for your sister to treat him badly was simply because he was different. He was left to sleep in the cupboard under the stairs, eat the scraps of food that no one else wanted, and work as a gardener, cook and maid. Would you blame her for treating your son like that just because he was a Muggle?"

Petunia was crying. "Dudley's not a freak. You are. You're the one who can heal in minutes what should take weeks. You're the one who used your freakish ways to get better grades than Dudley. You're the one who disrespects us. Not him."

Harry shook his head. "I studied, Aunt Petunia. I like learning." People gasped in shock at this. "And why should I respect people who act like the worst sort of criminals."

Petunia paled. "We don't..."

"You do." Harry paused for a moment. "You may continue, Fred."

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet drive for Christmas. Professor McGonagall had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, and Harry had signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

Harry smiled, thinking about his first real Christmas.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at

the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

“Hi, Hagrid, want any help?” Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

“That’s much better,” Molly told her son. “That’s the way I raised you to act.”

Ron turned red.

“Nah, I’m all right, thanks, Ron.”

“Would you mind moving out of the way?” came Malfoy’s cold drawl from behind them.

“How can a voice be cold?” Dudley asked stupidly.

Before Luna could answer, Sirius did. “It means his voice was unwelcoming.” Sirius looked around the table at everyone who was staring at him. “What? I’m not stupid, you know?”

“No, you just act like it,” Remus said, smirking.

“Bite me!”

“Do you really want me to respond to that?” Remus asked his friend.

Sirius grimaced. “Sorry, mate.”

“No problem.”

Petunia asked, “Why on earth would you be sorry about saying ‘bite me’?”

Harry grinned. “Aunt Petunia, it is my privilege to introduce you to a Werewolf.”

Remus grinned, and snapped his teeth playfully at Petunia.

She screamed loudly until Harry silenced her.

“Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose – that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to.”

Malfoy grimaced. “I'm really, really sorry.”

“It's not a problem,” Mr. Weasley said. “I'm sure that you were only repeating what you heard your father say.”

The blonde scion nodded.

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

“Gryffindor just lost a boatload of points,” Minerva grumbled.

“WEASLEY!”

Ron let go of Malfoy's robes.

“He was provoked, Professor Snape,” said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. “Malfoy was insultin' his family.”

“But that doesn't really matter, because fighting is still against the rules,” Severus commented.

“Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid,” said Snape silkily. “Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you.”

“Just so you know, I got in huge trouble for that in private,” Draco said. “Uncle Severus said that I was an embarrassment to the family name for behaving like a common ruffian.”

“No offense, Draco, but your family name was already disgraced from the whole serving a Dark Lord thing,” Harry said.

“Yeah, that really did a number on our reputations, eh?”

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scattering needles everywhere and smirking.

“I’ll get him,” said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy’s back, “one of these days, I’ll get him – ”

“I hate them both,” said Harry, “Malfoy and Snape.”

“Considering the way you treated me at the time, I think my feelings were completely understandable,” Harry commented to the Potions Professor.

“Indeed,” he replied.

“Come on, cheer up, it’s nearly Christmas,” said Hagrid. “Tell yeh what, come with me an’ see the Great Hall, looks a treat.”

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

“I do so love decorating the Great Hall,” Minerva said, and sighed in reminiscence.

“Ah, Hagrid, the last tree – put it in the far corner, would you?”

The Hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no fewer than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

“It was the first time I was ever allowed to look at a Christmas tree without being yelled for it,” Harry murmured.

Ree threw a nasty glare in the direction of Petunia Dursley.

“How many days you got left until yer holidays?” Hagrid asked.

“Just one,” said Hermione. “And that reminds me – Harry, Ron, we’ve got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library.”

“WHAT! That’s sacrilegious!” Sirius shouted, standing up.

Harry smirked. “How did you make the Marauders Map, Sirius?”

“We used a bunch of charms and stuff. Why?”

“Where did you get the charms?”

“We looked them up in the...oh.”

“Exactly. So, isn’t it safe to assume that using the library for nefarious purposes negates the sacrilege of being in the library?”

“Yes...I’m so proud of you!” Sirius wiped a fake tear from his eye.

“I’m so disgusted,” Minerva muttered under her breath.

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” said Ron,

Everyone stared in shock.

“WHAT?” Ron asked. “I use the library...sometimes.”

...tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming from out of his wand and trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

“The library?” said Hagrid following them out of the Hall. “Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren’t yeh?”

“Oh, we’re not working,” Harry told him brightly. “Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we’ve been trying to find out who he is.”

“You what?” Hagrid looked shocked. “Listen here – I’ve told yeh – drop it. It’s nothin’ to you what that dog’s guardin’.”

“I must say, you are a determined young man, aren’t you, Harry?” Albus said as he rooted through a pocket of his robe in search of a lemon drop. Alas, there were none.

“We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that’s all,” said Hermione.

“Unless you’d like to tell us and save us the trouble?” Harry added. “We must’ve been through hundreds of books already and we can’t find him anywhere – just give us a hint – I know I’ve read his name somewhere.”

“The giant will fold in seconds. We’re doomed,” Severus said in a flat tone of voice.

“He’s half-giant,” Harry corrected him.

“I’m sayin’ nothin’,” said Hagrid flatly.

“Wow, who would’ve thought he had it in him?” Severus asked rhetorically.

Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Fred, Ron, George, and Neville all raised their hands in response.

“Just have to find out for ourselves, then,” said Ron, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel’s name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal?

The man in question smirked.

The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book.



He wasn't in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, or Notable Magical Names of Our Time; he was missing, too, from Important Modern Magical Discoveries, and A Study of recent Developments in Wizardry. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

"And Hermione is now capable of finding any book in the library within seconds," Ron muttered grouchy.

"I know," Fred said dreamily. "She's perfect."

" coughSapcough," George hacked. Unfortunately for him, it sounded more like he had a hairball than anything.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off shelves at random.

"Oh, yeah, that'll help," Draco muttered sarcastically. "It's no wonder Granger chose the Pranking Putz over you. You don't have any common sense, do you?"

Ron turned red, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section. He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he'd never get one. These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry smirked. "And the Golden Trio when trying to brew Polyjuice Potion in the girls' lavatory."

"Excuse me? Who's the Golden Trio?" Lily asked.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione raised their hands.

“ My son...brewed...girls...bathroom...oh, Merlin’s brittle gray beard,” James moaned.

“How old were you when you did that Mr. Potter?” Severus asked. “That’s a NEWT level potion, so I’m sure that you failed, but I am curious as to your attempt.”

Harry grinned. “We brewed it during second year. It did work. By the way, Draco, did you ever figure out that Crabbe and Goyle weren’t really Crabbe and Goyle on Christmas night?”

“ NO! That was you? I thought that they had just passed out somewhere on the way to Hospital Wing, and didn’t remember our talk because they were ill! That was YOU!” Draco’s eyes were wide in shock.

“You brewed a NEWT level potion when you were in second year?” Severus asked incredulously.

“Well...technically Hermione did most of the work,” Harry explained.

“Twenty years too old,” Severus muttered, groaning.

Hermione looked green.

“What are you looking for, boy?”

“Nothing,” Harry said.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

“You’d better get out, then. Go on – out!”

“A feather duster?” Ree asked incredulously.

“She chucked a roll of Spellotape at the back of my head once when I fell asleep on a book,” James commented, “brandishing a feather duster is nothing.”

“Oh my,” Ree murmured.

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story, Harry left the library. He, Ron and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

“It's a shame that you couldn't,” Lily said. “Madam Pince knows where to find anything in the library.”

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been looking for two weeks, after all, but as they only had odd moments between lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing.

“Why were the moments odd?” Dudley asked stupidly.

“Because Fred turned us all green,” Harry said sarcastically.

“Oh.”

“Harry,” Hermione chided, “you really shouldn't prey on Dudley's stupidity. It's like – like...”

“Like when Dudley used to beat me up because I was smaller and weaker from a lack of food?” Harry finished for her.

She flushed, and said, “Well...yes.”

“Point taken, Hermione.”

“Huh,” Dudley said, looking confused. So in other words, he looked completely normal.

What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breathing down their necks.

“Yeah, good luck with that, Harry,” James said sarcastically.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

“You will keep looking while I’m away, won’t you?” said Hermione. “And you’ll send me an owl if you find anything.”

“And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is,” said Ron. “It’d be safe to ask them.”

“Very safe, as they’re both dentists,” said Hermione.

Draco looked confused. “What are dentists?”

“They are Muggle teeth Healers,” Hermione explained.

“Muggles have those!” Draco said excitedly.

“Tell you what, Draco, when we take you into the Muggle world, I’ll get my parents to give you a free checkup,” Hermione said, smiling at him as though he were a toddler who just asked to help make cookies.

“Awesome!” he breathed.

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel.

Hermione huffed at that.

They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spare on a toasting fork – bread, crumpets, marshmallows – and plotting ways of

getting Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk about even if they wouldn't work.

Draco arched a brow at this. He looked unnervingly like his godfather.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in a battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family – in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Ron smirked. "I love chess."

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him and they didn't trust him at all.

James winced.

He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send him, we can afford to lose him."

"No wonder you weren't very good," Remus moaned.

On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all.

"AWWW!" all of the women, barring Petunia, moaned.

"Thank Merlin that Ron warned me about that," Molly murmured. "The idea of a child not getting any Christmas presents just breaks my heart."

"Mine too," Ree whispered.

"Wait a second," Draco muttered. "They never even got you anything for Christmas?"

“Nope,” Harry said, “unless you want to count a used toothpick as a present.”

Draco shuddered. “That’s disgusting.”

“Indeed,” Severus agreed.

When he woke early next morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

“Good,” Lily sighed, as James nodded in agreement.

“Merry Christmas,” said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

“Whose bathrobe did Harry put on, his own or Ron’s?” Charles asked.

Everyone stared at him.

“It was a joke, people,” he snapped.

“Oh,” Ree said. “Warn us next time, dear. That way we’ll know to laugh.”

“Are you saying that my jokes aren’t funny?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying.” She patted his arm, and nodded at Fred to continue reading.

“You too,” said Harry. “Will you look at this? I’ve got some presents!”

“What did you expect, turnips?” said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry’s.

” I was expecting nothing,” Harry muttered.

“I know that now,” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid.

Minerva smiled. “Hagrid is such a dear.”

Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew it – it sounded a bit like an owl.

” Awww,” Lily said. “He made it himself.”

Sirius stared at Ree, as though he was expecting her to take notes, but she didn’t.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present.  
From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.

“They actually sent you something,” James said in shock.

Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

Everyone glared at the Dursleys, who had the grace to look mildly ashamed.

“That’s friendly,” said Harry.

“That’s a lot nicer than what I would’ve said,” Molly snapped, surprising her sons.

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

“Weird!” he said. “What a shape! This is money?”

“Just like his father,” Molly murmured, as she ruffled Ron’s hair.

Ron blushed.

“You can keep it,” said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. “Hagrid and my aunt and uncle - so who sent these?”

“I think I know who that one’s from,” said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. “My mom. I told her you didn’t expect any presents and – oh, no,” he groaned, “she’s made you a Weasley sweater.”

“You know, I never understood your embarrassment about them,” Harry said to Ron. “They’re the best presents ever, because your mom makes them out of love. It’s a lot nicer than anything store bought.”

Molly beamed at him.

“You’re right Harry. I just get jealous ‘cause we can’t afford much,” Ron said, his ears turning pink.

“If you had all the galleons in the world, but no family, you wouldn’t feel that way,” Harry said knowingly.

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of home-made fudge.

“A very good choice,” Ree murmured to Molly. “The color of the sweater will bring out his eyes; and I’ve never known a boy to turn down sweets.”

“Thank you, dear,” Molly replied.

“Every year she makes us a sweater,” said Ron unwrapping his own, “and mine’s always maroon.”

“That’s really nice of her,” said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

“Thank you, Harry,” Molly said, smiling.



“Your welcome.”

His next present also contained candy – a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione.

” I love chocolate,” Harry sighed.

“Me too,” Remus agreed.

“Oh, Merlin...Remus has corrupted my son! I’m so proud of you!” James practically attacked Remus, sobbing dramatically.

“Get off!” Remus shoved his friend off of his lap.

This left only one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery grey went slithering to the floor, where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

” It can’t be,” James breathed in awe.

“Let it be,” Sirius begged.

“It probably is,” Charles murmured.

“I’m sure it is,” Remus said with confidence.

“I want one,” Draco moaned.

“You’re never getting one,” Severus told him.

“I pray to Merlin that it’s not,” Minerva groaned.

“What is it?” Lily asked in confusion.

“I’ve heard of those,” he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he’d gotten from Hermione. “If that’s what I think it is – they’re really rare, and really valuable.”

“But what is it?” Lily asked.

“What is it?”

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to touch, like water woven into material.

“It is!” the Marauders yelled before breaking into some sort of a dance.

“Sit down,” McGonagall hissed like the cat she was.

“It’s an Invisibility Cloak,”

“OH, NO!” Lily moaned.

Ree, Molly, and Minerva groaned.

…said Ron, a look of awe on his face. “I’m sure it is – try it on.”

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

“It is! Look down!”

“Think of all the pranks he can pull now, James,” Sirius whispered.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’ve never pulled pranks. The school wouldn’t have survived the son of a Marauder and the Weasley twins,” Harry explained.

“It’s a shame. Such a sad, sad waste,” Sirius moaned.

Harry grinned. “But that’s not saying that I didn’t use it for nefarious purposes.”

Sirius perked up at that.

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

James exchanged a grin and a wink with his father.

“There’s a note!” said Ron suddenly. “A note fell out of it!”

” Good!” Lily said. “Now we can find out who sent it.”

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words:

Your father left this in my possession before he died.

It is time it was returned to you.

Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature.

“It was Dumbledore,” James said. “I’d bet my broomstick.”

“But which one,” Sirius asked a mischievous look on his face. “Your Nimbus, or your...”

James glared. “The Nimbus of course, Harry might not exist if I bet the other and was wrong.”

All of the women groaned at the hideous analogy.

Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the Cloak.

“I’d give anything for one of these,” he said. “Anything. What’s the matter?”

“Not anymore,” Ron said. “Now I can just borrow Harry’s.”

“Nothing,” said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

“You don’t trust easily do you?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not anymore. And really, considering the number of trusted adults that have tried to do me in, it’s hardly surprising.”

Dumbledore simply sighed sadly.

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in.

“YAY!” the twins cheered.

Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight. He didn’t feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

“We don’t blame you either, Harry,” they said in unison.

“Merry Christmas!”

“Hey, look – Harry’s got a Weasley sweater, too!”

Fred and George were wearing blue jumpers, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

“That is so sweet,” Ree cooed.

“Harry’s is better than ours, though,” said Fred, holding up Harry’s jumper. “She obviously makes more of an effort if you’re not family.”

“Actually,” Molly explained. “Ginny picked out the yarn, and pitched in some of her savings as it was more expensive than usual.”

Harry smiled and pecked a kiss on his girlfriend’s cheek.

“Why aren’t you wearing yours, Ron?” George demanded. “Come on, get it on, they’re lovely and warm.”

Molly smiled at her boys. It was clear that Fred and George really appreciated the effort she put into making the sweaters.

“I hate maroon,” Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

“You haven’t got a letter on yours,” George observed. “I suppose she thinks you don’t forget your name. But we’re not stupid – we know we’re called Gred and Forge.”

The Marauders burst into laughter.

“You know, Siri,” James said, “if we were twins, I bet we’d do the very same thing.”

Sirius nodded seriously...or was it siriusly...I can never remember.

“What’s all this noise?”

Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving.

“In other words,” Fred interrupted himself, “he looked like normal.”

He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which Fred seized.

“P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we’re all wearing ours, even Harry got one.”

“I – don’t – want –” said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

“Penelope was staying at the school for Christmas too, and he was embarrassed because it was home-made,” Ginny explained.

“That was when he was still trying to impress her, before asking her out,” George added.

“And you’re not sitting with the Prefects today, either,” said George. “Christmas is a time for family.”

“That did not go down well,” George said.

“He wanted to spend the day with Penny,” Fred finished.

“Well, I for one am glad that you two wanted to spend time with your family, even with the brother that most annoyed you,” Hermione said, and kissed Fred on the cheek.

They frog-marched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his sides by his sweater.

“Ah...memories,” Ron sighed blissfully.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of fat chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce – and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table.

Dudley moaned in jealousy. “I’m hungry,” he complained, but apparently The Powers That Be felt that he could wait a little longer before his next meal.

These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside. Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn’t just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear-admiral’s hat and several live, white mice.

Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard’s hat for a flowered bonnet and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Petunia and Vernon glared at Dumbledore as though his very existence was an affront.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lop-sided.

Minerva blushed, as everyone who hadn't been there for the event, stared at her.

Ree summed it up for everyone when she said, "Well, who knew?"

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of non-explodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit and his own new wizard chess set.

"Nice haul," James commented.

The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris' Christmas dinner.

Everyone shuddered.

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight in the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

"You were probably right about that, Harry," Ron said. "Percy is terrible at chess."

"And you didn't think to tell me that then," Harry said.

“It’s all about strategy, mate,” Ron said, smirking.

“Slytherin,” Draco muttered, causing Ron’s eyes to widen and his ears turn red.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor Tower because they’d stolen his prefect badge.

“Too bad I missed it,” Hermione moaned.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Fred said. “I’ll do it to Ron for you when we get home.”

Ron turned red, but said nothing.

It had been Harry’s best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the Invisibility Cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him, fell asleep almost as soon as he’d drawn the curtains of his four-poster.

Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father’s ... this had been his father’s. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had said.

He had to try it, now.

“No,” Lily moaned.



He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

James eyes glazed over in remembrance of the rush of adrenalin that overcame him each time he put on the cloak.

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back – his father's cloak – he felt that this time – the first time – he wanted to use it alone.

“I don't blame you there,” Ron said.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room and climbed through the portrait hole.

“Who's there?” squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library.

“That's my boy,” James said with pride.

He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the Invisibility Cloak tight around him as he walked.

The library was pitch black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books.

The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

” Yeah, that would be a little creepy,” Charles said, shuddering.

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Stepping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

They didn’t tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn’t understand. Some had no title at all. One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood.

Everyone shuddered.

The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn’t be.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. My mum charmed her books to scream if they were ever picked up by me. Not Regulus though, oh no, not their perfect Death Eater son,” Sirius said with resentment.

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interesting-looking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, blood-curdling shriek split the silence – the book was screaming!

” Yep. That’s what my mum’s books did,” Sirius said.

Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once.

Panicking, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside – stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it.

Lily had grabbed Sirius' nail file and was filing her nails down to nubs.

He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. He had been so busy getting away from the library; he hadn't paid any attention to where he was going.

"Uh-oh," Neville murmured.

Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

"You already knew where the kitchens were? And it's only your first year?" Charles looked impressed.

Harry simply nodded.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library – Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a short cut, because his soft, greasy voice was getting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied.

Snape smirked. "I love catching students out of bed, swooping out of nowhere and startling them." He sighed happily.

"The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him – the cloak didn't stop him being solid.

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was his only hope.

"Well that's lucky," James said.

"No, I'd bet that that's Dumbledore," Remus said. "He has a plan for nearly everything."

Dumbledore blushed but said nothing.

He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it, and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything.

"It's because you were way too small for your age that you were able to," Neville said, glaring at Petunia.

They walked straight past and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket – but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

"See, Dumbledore had to have had something to do with it," Remus said as though something odd being in the classroom was solid proof of Dumbledore's manipulations.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

George perked up. "I show not your face but your heart's desire," he said.

Everyone stared at him in shock until Fred explained for his twin. "One time, in second year, we spent a whole month talking and writing in mirror speak. It drove McGonagall mental. We got a month of detentions and lost fifty points apiece, but it was worth it."

His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed – for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

Remus looked as though he was trying to figure something out.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder – but, still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

"That doesn't make sense," the werewolf muttered.

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she really was there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air – she and the others existed only in the mirror.

Remus' eyes widened. He had just figured it out.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes – her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass.

“Oh,” Lily said softly, her eyes glistening.

Bright green – exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time.

All of the women were close to tears...well...not Petunia, but we're not counting her.

The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just like Harry's did.

James eyes began to shine. “Gotta speck of dust,” he muttered, rubbing them furiously.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

“Mum?” he whispered. “Dad?”

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, and even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees – Harry was looking at his family for the first time in his life.

“The man with the knobbly knees was my grandfather,” Lily told Harry.

His eyes shimmered a little and he nodded at her.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through and reach them.

“Oh,” Dumbledore murmured, sensing the danger.

He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

Lily began to softly cry, and James gave up all pretense of dirt in his eye, and cried himself. He gathered Lily into his arms and cried into her hair.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here; he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whispered, “I'll come back,” and hurried from the room.

“Bad idea,” Remus said. “They aren't really there, and trying to convince yourself otherwise isn't healthy.”

“I know, Remus,” Harry said sadly.

“You could have woken me up,” said Ron, crossly.

Ron winced. “Hermione was right. I did have the emotional range of a teaspoon.”

“You still do,” she dryly retorted.

“You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror.”

“I'd like to see your mum and dad,” Ron said eagerly.

“And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone.”

“The mirror doesn’t work like that,” Dumbledore tried to explain, but he was cut off.

“I already know that, Professor.”

“Oh, right, carry on then.”

“You can see them any old time,” said Ron. “Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people. Shame about not finding Flamel, though. Have some bacon or something, why aren’t you eating anything?”

Harry couldn’t eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn’t seem very important anymore.

“That’s not good,” Ree muttered.

Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

“Are you all right?” said Ron. “You look odd.”

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak too, they had to walk much more slowly next night. They tried retracing Harry’s route from the library, wandering around the dark passageways for nearly an hour.

“I’m freezing,” said Ron. “Let’s forget it and go back.”

“Wow, Ron was the voice of reason...who knew,” George muttered sarcastically.

“No!” Harry hissed. “I know it’s here somewhere.”

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. Just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead with cold, Harry spotted the suit of armor.



“It’s here – just here – yes!”

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from round his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

“Yup, that’s bad,” Sirius said. “He’s addicted.”

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

“See?” Harry whispered.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Look! Look at them all...there are loads of them...”

“I can only see you.”

“Look in it properly, go on, and stand where I am.”

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn’t see his family any more, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

“Paisley?” Draco snickered. “That’s so tacky.”

“We couldn’t afford anything else, so shut your yap, Ferret-breath,” Ron muttered.

Draco winced. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“S’alright.”

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

“Look at me!” he said.

“Can you see all your family standing around you?”

“No – I’m alone – but I’m different – I look older – and I’m Head Boy!”

“That’s your heart’s desire?” Fred asked incredulously.

“It was then. Times change,” Ron pouted.

“What?”

“I am – I’m wearing the badge like Bill used to - and I’m holding the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup – I’m Quidditch captain, too!”

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

“Do you think this mirror shows the future?”

Everyone winced at the tactless thought.

“How can it? All my family are dead – let me have another look –”

“You had it all to yourself last night, give me a bit more time.”

“You’re only holding the Quidditch Cup, what’s interesting about that? I want to see my parents.”

“Don’t push me –”

Lily winced. “This could only go downhill,” she commented to James in a whisper.

He nodded.

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their discussion. They hadn’t realized how loudly they had been talking.

“Quick!”

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing – did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

“This isn’t safe – she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on.”

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

James sighed in relief. “Good idea, go away, far, far away.”

The snow still hadn’t melted the next morning.

“How could snow melt the morning?” Dudley grunted, not unlike a pig.

“The meant that the snow hadn’t melted,” Luna said in a frustrated tone, proving that even the best of us have our limits.

“Want to play chess, Harry?” said Ron.

“No.”

“Why don’t we go down and visit Hagrid?”

“No...you go...”

“I know what you’re thinking about, Harry, that mirror. Don’t go back tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, I’ve just got a bad feeling about it – and, anyway, you’ve had too many close shaves already. Filch, Snape and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can’t see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?”

“That was very astute, Ronald,” Hermione said.

He blushed. “What does astute mean?” he asked.

“Wise.”

“Oh. Thanks, Hermione.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You sound like Hermione.”

Everyone had to stifle a laugh at that.

“I’m serious, Harry, don’t go.”

“No! I’m Sirius.”

“Shut up, Padfoot. That joke is older than we are,” Remus said.

But Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn’t going to stop him.

Everyone groaned.

That third night he found his way more quickly than before. He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn’t meet anyone.

“Dumbledore...” Remus muttered knowingly.

And there were his mother and father, smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

“Famous last words,” Charles muttered.

Except –

“So – back again, Harry?”

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore.

“See,” Remus said smugly.

Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn’t noticed him.

“I – I didn’t see you, sir.”

“Strange how short-sighted being invisible can make you,” said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

Harry chuckled. “This from the man who doesn’t need a cloak to become invisible.”

Dumbledore smiled and nodded his head in acquiescence. “Touché.”

“So,” said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, “you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised.”

“I didn’t know it was called that, sir.”

“But I expect you’ve realized by now what it does?”

“It – well – it shows me my family –”

“And it showed your friend Ron himself as Head Boy.”

“You were spying,” Severus accused the Headmaster. “Very Slytherin of you, very Slytherin indeed.”

“How did you know –?”

“I don’t need a cloak to become invisible,” said Dumbledore gently. “Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?”

Harry shook his head.

“Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?”

Harry thought. Then he said slowly. “It shows us what we want...whatever we want ...”

“Yes and no,” said Dumbledore quietly. “It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.”

The Weasleys all stared at Ron.

“You really felt that overshadowed by your brothers?” Molly asked.

“Well,” Ron tried to explain. “I just felt like I could never be good enough. It’s like what you said when I got my prefect badge. How wonderful. A Prefect, that’s everyone in the family.”

“Oy! You forgetting us?” George asked.

“No. That time she did. Besides, you two more than make up for it with your pranks and business.”

“Oh, dear. We’ll have a chat when the chapter is over, alright, Ron?” Molly asked.

“Alright.”

“The mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don’t you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?”

“Dumbledore just confirmed a suspicion I had,” Remus said. “This was just a prelude. Harry’s going to see that mirror again. I’m certain. And Dumbledore is already counting on it, though why, I don’t know.”

The other two Marauders looked thoughtful.

Harry stood up.

” Sir – Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?”

“Obviously, you’ve just done so,” Dumbledore smiled. “You may ask me one more thing, however.”

“What do you see when you look in the Mirror?”

“Don’t you think that’s a little personal?” Lily asked rhetorically.

“I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.”

“He lied. It really was too personal, and he didn’t want Harry to know the truth,” Lily explained.

Harry stared.

” One can never have enough socks,” said Dumbledore. “Another Christmas gone and I didn’t get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.”

Everyone chuckled at that.

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

“That’s my boy,” Lily murmured.

“I see my sister.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “I see my sister in the mirror. She died, and it’s partly my fault. I trusted someone, but my brother didn’t. And one day the two began to fight. My sister was mentally unstable, and couldn’t defend herself, or even be aware of the danger. She was hit by a curse, and died; all because I didn’t trust my brother’s opinion on my friend. Incidentally, that friend was Grindelwald, before he turned dark. My sister paid for my folly,” he said sadly, and wiped a tear from his eye.

Minerva handed him the bowl of lemon drops that she’d confiscated earlier.

“Thank you, My Dear.” He popped one into his mouth.

That was the cue for everyone to take a break.

**HUFFLEPUFF WINS THE HOUSE CUP!** See my page for details on the next House Cup challenge.



he Weasley family retreated into the corner of the room to have the much overdue talk with Ron.

While they talked, Harry and Draco began a conversation about dueling, and the Marauders were busy tormenting the Dursleys. They found that if they kept whispering to each other and pointing or looking at the Dursleys, the family of three would get panicked expressions on their faces.

After nearly an hour of this, they were finally ready to go on with the story.

And this time it was Ron's turn to read.

### Chapter Thirteen: Nicolas Flamel

"Oh, good," Lily said, "they're finally going to find out who he is."

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the invisibility cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk.

The Marauders groaned in annoyance.

Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light while a high voice cackled with laughter.

"Oh, dear," Dumbledore muttered under his breath. "I must remember to Obliviate him before I leave him with the Muggles."

Unfortunately for him, Minerva heard him say that.

"YOU WILL NOT!" she snapped.

Dumbledore paled, and shrank away from the irate witch.

“You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad,” said Ron, when Harry told him about these dreams.

“I don’t think having nightmares constitutes madness, Ronald,” Luna said in a dreamy voice.

“I said could not did,” Ron muttered blushing.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row (“If Filch had caught you!”), and disappointment that he hadn’t found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

“After all the times we’ve been out after curfew, I find it hard to believe that I was ever that rule-abiding,” Hermione said.

Fred sighed dreamily, and grinned sappily at her. “Isn’t she perfect?” he asked no one.

Ron snorted.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he’d read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

“Brilliant,” James said excitedly.

Sirius nodded in agreement.

Wood was working them harder than ever.

“I don’t blame him,” Charles said, thinking of his own days on the Gryffindor team.

Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side.

Everyone stared at the twins.

"What?!" Fred said. "It's not our fault."

"It was freezing cold," George contributed.

"And he was working us five times a week."

"I still agree with Wood," Harry said, "If our team wants to win the Cup each year, then we have to work for it."

Minerva beamed with pride.

If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years.

"Brilliant," Minerva muttered. "Take that, Severus," and she playfully punched his arm.

Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

"Aww," Ree and Molly murmured together.

"You poor dear," Molly continued.

Harry blushed bright red.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just got very angry with the Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

"That was so much fun," George said happily.

Fred nodded in agreement.

“Let’s do that next time, James,” Sirius said, bouncing in his seat.

“Sure,” James agreed.

“Will you stop messing around!” he yelled. “That’s exactly the sort of thing that’ll lose us the match! Snape’s refereeing this time, and he’ll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!”

“Nooo,” the Marauders and Charles moaned.

“Oh, shut up!” Snape snapped.

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words.

Snape snickered.

“Snape’s refereeing?” he spluttered through a mouthful of mud.

“Eewww!” over half the room moaned. No doubt the elder two Dursleys would have as well, but they were still silenced.

“When’s he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He’s not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin.”

“Honestly,” Severus groaned. “Is that really what you all think of me?”

“YES!” the Gryffindors and the lone Ravenclaw said together.

“Well!” he snapped, “I’ll have you know that I referee matches whenever Madam Hooch is ill!”

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too.

“It’s not my fault,” said Wood. “We’ve just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn’t got an excuse to pick on us.”

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another reason for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quidditch...

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake...” Severus moaned, throwing his hands in the air in frustration.

The rest of the team hung back to talk to each other as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

“Hey!”

“Sorry, Hermione, but you can’t be perfect at everything or you’ll get a big head,” Harry said.

Ron added, “And Merlin knows that we don’t need another Percy.”

Hermione shuddered. “Point taken!”

“Don’t talk to me for a moment,” said Ron when Harry sat down next to him. “I need to concen – ” He caught sight of Harry’s face. “What’s the matter with you? You look terrible.”

“At least you noticed that time,” Hermione muttered.

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape’s sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

“Don’t play,” said Hermione at once.

The Marauders looked horrified at the very thought.

“Say you’re ill,” said Ron.

Minerva shook her head. “Ridiculous,” she muttered.

“Pretend to break your leg,” Hermione suggested.

“And you don’t think that Madam Pomfrey would see right through that?” Draco asked incredulously.

“Really break your leg,” said Ron.

“Madam Pomfrey can mend bones in an instant,” Neville said. “That would never work.”

“I can’t,” said Harry. “There isn’t a reserve Seeker. If I back out, Gryffindor can’t play at all.”

“If I were there,” Ginny said.

“I know, Ginny, you would Seek in my place in an instant,” Harry said.

She nodded. “Stupid age limit to go to Hogwarts. If I were only a year older.”

“Hey!” Harry said. “That’s an idea! Professor Dumbledore, how about this time around, you let her come to school a year early?”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened. “No, Harry, I won’t do that. The age limit is there for a reason. Ten year olds are not magically capable yet.”

“Oh come off it, Old Man,” Draco snapped. “My father taught me magic with my grandfather’s wand when I was only eight! You just made that up. You probably figured that because Harry grew up in the Muggle world then he would just take your word for it.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, let me guess. You also lied when you said that I would be protected by blood wards at my Aunt’s.” Harry suddenly looked really mad. “Hang on! Those wards were based on my mother’s love for me! So, if I understand wards correctly, and I think I do as I’ve been researching them for years; that would mean that the wards at my Aunt’s are non-existent. She hates me! And

besides, Privet Drive hasn't been my home since I first arrived at Hogwarts."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, he always says that Hogwarts is his home!"

Dumbledore looked ill.

Ree and Charles looked furious.

"Dumbledore!" Ree snapped. "I create wards, and everything Harry said is true. You've been lying to my grandson for years. You will send him to Aurora's! That is final!"

Albus' mouth opened and shut again. Perhaps it would be best to just shut up, he thought.

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor Tower.

"I did," Neville confirmed.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the counter-curse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling.

"Thanks for that, Hermione," Neville said, blushing.

"What happened?" Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

Malfoy paled suddenly.

"Malfoy," said Neville shakily. "I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on."

"I am so sorry," Draco said sincerely. "I was such an..."

“ASS, we KNOW!” everyone said.

He blushed.

“Go to Professor McGonagall!” Hermione urged him. “Report him!”

“Very good idea, Miss Granger,” Minerva said, giving her a small smile.

“Thanks,” Hermione muttered, blushing.

Neville shook his head.

“I don’t want more trouble,” he mumbled.

“You’ve got to stand up to him, Neville!” said Ron. “He’s used to walking all over people, but that’s no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier.”

“There’s no need to tell me I’m not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy’s already done that,” Neville choked out.

“Mr. Longbottom,” Minerva said. “I don’t care what you think. I’m proud to have you in my house.”

Neville blushed and said, “Thanks.”

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

“That’s my son,” Lily said proudly.

“Indeed he is,” Molly said, looking quite proud of him herself.



“You’re worth twelve of Malfoy,” Harry said. “The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn’t it? And where’s Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin.”

“No offense or anything,” Harry said.

“None taken,” Draco and Severus said together.

Severus commented, “We both made Slytherin look bad.” He winced in remembrance.

Neville’s lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

“Thanks again for that, Harry,” Neville said. “You guys were my only real friends that year.”

Harry mentally flinched. He hadn’t acted much like a friend to Neville that year.

“Thanks, Harry ... I think I’ll go to bed ... D’you want the card, you collect them, don’t you?”

Lily, meanwhile, was feeling quite proud of her son for the way he handled that situation.

As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

“Dumbledore again,” he said. “He was the first one I ever – ”

He gasped. He stared at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

“I’ve found him!” he whispered. “I’ve found Flamel! I told you I’d read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here – listen to this: ‘Professor Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!’”

“That’s hilarious,” Remus muttered. “All that work looking things up in the library, and all they’d had to do was look at a Chocolate Frog card. This is why I always say, ‘Chocolate is the answer to everything!’”

Sirius and James nodded solemnly in agreement.

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd got back their marks for their very first piece of homework.

“Wow! Really excited then?” Fred asked.

“Oh, shut up!” she snapped.

“Stay there!” she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls’ dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

“I never thought to look in here!” she whispered excitedly. “I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading.”

“At last,” Lily sighed, “I’m not the only one who feels that way about large books!”

“Light?” said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she’d looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

“You sound mental when you do that, you know?” Ron said.

Hermione glared at him. “I’m never letting you borrow my History of Magic notes again. You can just write your own from now on.”

“Hermione!” Ron said, “That is just cruel.”

“Save it for someone who cares.”

At last she found what she was looking for.

“I knew it! I knew it!”

“You always do,” Fred said happily.

“Are we allowed to speak yet?” said Ron grumpily.

“You know, you should really learn to appreciate her,” Fred snapped. “She is gorgeous when she’s being bossy. Why do you think George and I try to annoy her so much?”

Ron turned green. “You like that about her? You are mental!”

Hermione just kissed Fred again.

Ron shook his head, muttering about Mind Healers, and began to read again.

Hermione ignored him.

“Nicolas Flamel,” she whispered dramatically, “is the only known maker of the Sorcerer’s Stone!”

“Honestly!” Hermione snapped. “It’s the Philosopher’s Stone not Sorcerer’s!”

This didn’t have quite the effect she’d expected.

“The what?” said Harry and Ron.

“Oh, honestly, don’t you two read? Look – read that, there.”

She pushed the book towards them, and Harry and Ron read:

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer’s Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"I FINALLY FIGURED IT OUT!" Sirius cried out, leaping to his feet. "THE DOG IS GUARDING THE SORCERER'S STONE!"

Hermione groaned. "Philosopher's," she muttered to herself.

Harry looked at his parents. "I love Sirius and all, but why couldn't you have given me a normal godparent?"

James looked affronted. "Sacrilege," he muttered.

"I'll try to reason with your father, dear," Lily said kindly.

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Sorcerer's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

Severus rolled his eyes in amusement.

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

"Why don't you just state the obvious, Weasley," Draco muttered, making Ron blush.

Next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still

discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

"The Chudley Canons," Ron murmured dreamily.

Sirius looked disgusted. "But they're awful," he said.

Ron looked miffed. "I don't care! They're still my favorite team!"

"At least he's loyal," Remus said, shrugging.

"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them ... it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

Minerva grinned broadly. "You're going down!" she said to Severus.

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the pitch," said Hermione.

"You have a lot of faith in him, don't you?" Draco asked sarcastically.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

Severus again rolled his eyes.

Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to be running into Snape wherever he went.

"I'm protecting you," Snape said, a little bit annoyed.

At times, he wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry.

“Sorry,” Severus muttered.

Could Snape possibly know they’d found out about the Sorcerer’s Stone? Harry didn’t see how he could – yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.

“Sorry,” Severus said again, knowing that he probably had.

“Just don’t do it this time around,” Harry said.

“I won’t,” he promised

Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the changing rooms next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they’d ever see him alive again.

This wasn’t what you’d call comforting.

“It was rather like when you snuck into the Champion’s tent during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Hermione,” Harry said, “it kind of rots a person’s courage when their friends don’t believe in them.”

Hermione blushed. “You were facing a dragon, Harry!”

“I know,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Wait!” James said, “You’re saying that you were in a Tri-Wizard Tournament. And you faced a dragon!”

“Yes,” Harry said, still matter-of-factly.

James and Lily exchanged looks. They were older than Harry, and they would have been petrified to face a dragon. Never mind speaking of it so calmly afterwards.

“What did you have to do?” Remus asked.

“I had to get past it to steal an egg from its nest.”

“Well, did you?” Sirius asked excitedly.

“Yes. I summoned my broom and out-flew it.”

“Awesome,” the Marauders breathed.

Ron decided to continue the story.

Harry hardly heard a word of Wood’s pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn’t understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match.

“Never go anywhere without your wands!” Snape snapped. “Do you want to die!”

“Gee, Sevvie, melodramatic, much?” Lily asked sarcastically.

Severus groaned at the childhood nickname.

Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They’d got the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

“Hah! I did something that turned out for the best!” Draco said happily.

“That is really pathetic if you feel that good about it,” Ron said.

“Yeah, it is isn’t it,” Draco laughed at himself

“Now, don’t forget, it’s Locomotor Mortis,” Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

“I know,” Ron snapped. “Don’t nag.”

“Sorry,” Hermione said, “it’s a bad habit when I’m nervous.”

“You can nag me anytime,” Fred said, gazing at her with adoration.

Back in the changing room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

“Don’t want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the snitch it’s now. Finish the game before Snape can favor Hufflepuff too much.”

“Good idea,” James said.

“The whole school’s out there!” said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. “Even – blimey – Dumbledore’s come to watch!”

“At least you’re good for something,” Lily muttered to the Headmaster who flinched.

Harry’s heart did a somersault.

“Dumbledore?” he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

“Except when Santa’s around,” Sirius said happily.

Everyone just stared at him.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief. He was safe. There was simply no way Snape would dare to try and hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

“You mean that there’s no way Quirrell would dare try and hurt you with Dumbledore there,” Snape amended.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the pitch, something that Ron noticed, too.



“I’ve never seen Snape look so mean,” he told Hermione. “Look – they’re off. Ouch!”

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

“Sorry,” Draco said sincerely.

“Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn’t see you there.”

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

“Wonder how long Potter’s going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?”

Draco flinched. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he muttered hitting his forehead on the table.

“Stop it! You’ll bruise yourself,” Luna said, concerned.

Draco stared at her in shock. No one ever cared about him...until now, apparently.

Ron didn’t answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him.

The Marauders and the twins snickered. Even Lily smiled. It was obvious that hitting a Bludger at Snape was a good way to ease the tension in a room.

Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

“You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?” said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all.

Severus flinched.

“It’s the people they feel sorry for. See, there’s Potter, who’s got no parents, then there’s the Weasleys, who’ve got no money – you should be on the team, Longbottom, you’ve got no brains.”

“I am so sorry!” the ass declared loudly.

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

“I’m worth twelve of you, Malfoy,” he stammered.

“Really!” Harry said excited, “you told him that, Neville? That’s brilliant!”

Neville blushed.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, “You tell him, Neville.”

Molly Weasley nodded approvingly.

“Longbottom, if brains were gold you’d be poorer than Weasley, and that’s saying something.”

Malfoy flinched.

Ron’s nerves were already stretched to breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

“I’m warning you, Malfoy – one more word – ”

“Ron!” said Hermione suddenly. “Harry – !”

“What? Where?”

“What about Harry?” Ree asked.

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

“Go Harry!” James and Sirius cheered, leaping out of their seats and high-fiving each other.

“You’re in luck, Weasley, Potter’s obviously spotted some money on the ground!” said Malfoy.

Ron snapped.

“I don’t blame you,” Draco said sheepishly.

Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

Harry beamed at Neville.

“Come on, Harry!” Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape – she didn’t even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe and Goyle.

“Brilliant!” James declared. “Frank would be so proud!”

Neville blushed. No one ever said that about him.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches – next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in triumph, the Snitch clasped in his hand.

Everyone who enjoyed Quidditch cheered at that.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever remember the Snitch being caught so quickly.

“Wow!” Charles declared

“Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game’s over! Harry’s won! We’ve won! Gryffindor is in the lead!” shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

“Wow! You really were happy!” Harry said. “You and Parvati never get along.”

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn’t believe it. He’d done it – the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes.

Charles’ eyes widened. “That’s a world record!”

“What?” Harry asked in shock.

“It’s a record,” he stated again. “No one’s ever caught the snitch that fast before.”

Harry stared in shock.

As Gryffindors came spilling on to the pitch, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped – then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumbledore’s smiling face.

“Well done,” said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. “Nice to see you haven’t been brooding about that mirror...been keeping busy...excellent...”

“You know, Sir,” Harry said. “After all that...after all the talks we’ve had...last year you treated me like I had the plague, all because you thought that Voldemort could be spying on you through my connection to him. That hurt!”

Dumbledore flinched.

“And,” Harry continued, “If you’d only talked to me, and told me what was going on, then we could have avoided a whole lot of trouble. Then someone I really cared about wouldn’t have died.” He finished rather bitterly.

Dumbledore remained silent, but looked thoughtful.

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

Harry left the changing room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn’t ever remember feeling happier.

“That’s sad,” Ree remarked.

He’d really done something to be proud of now – no one could say he was just a famous name any more.

“And yet, to a lot of people that’s still all I am. The Chosen One, the Boy-Who Lived, and on a bad day Slytherin’s Heir, a Dark-Wizard-in-training or my personal favorite...an attention-seeking glory-hound,” Harry muttered sarcastically.

“You aren’t Slytherin’s heir,” James said.

“No, I’m not, but I am a Parselmouth, so for a while people suspected me of being him.”

The evening air had never smelled so sweet.

He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him on to their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Molly’s eyes widened.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape...

And speaking of Snape...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk.

"Very observant," Severus remarked. "Excellent."

Snape was sneaking into the Forest while everyone else was at dinner – what was going on? Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. He followed.

Lily groaned, but James and Sirius looked excited.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided towards them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

"Excellent," Severus said again.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves.

Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too.

"Fascinating," Severus said.

Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

“...d-don’t know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus...”

“Oh, I thought we’d keep this private,” said Snape, his voice icy. “Students aren’t supposed to know about the Sorcerer’s Stone after all.”

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

“Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid’s yet?”

“Ahah! I’m trying to find out what he knows so I can warn the Headmaster!” Severus said.

“B-b-but Severus, I – ”

“You don’t want me as your enemy, Quirrell,” said Snape, taking a step towards him.

“I hate to admit it, but I’m impressed,” James said.

Sirius looked disgusted, but nodded in agreement.

“I-I don-t know what you – ”

“You know perfectly well what I mean.”

An owl hooted loudly and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, “– your little bit of hocus pocus. I’m waiting.”

“That’s really odd that an owl would hoot at the critical moment where Harry would have found out what side I’m on,” Severus said. “The owl did it on purpose!”

Everyone looked at him like he was nuts.

Then he said, "You interfering old coot!"

Suddenly it all made sense.

Harry groaned. "Your animagus form is an owl isn't it, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore simply nodded.

"B-but I d-d-don't – "

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

"You do intimidating very well, Sir," Harry commented.

"Thank you," Severus replied, smiling and nearly giving Ginny a heart-attack from shock.

He threw the cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"I am not a mouse!" Hermione snapped.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be all right – talk about showing Slytherin!"

"Good for you, Neville!" James said, beaming.

"Definitely Franks' son!" Remus said, grinning wildly.

Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."



Hermione snorted. "More like you were begged to take them by the house elves."

"Yes, but they just adore working, and who are we to deny them that fun," George said, smiling charmingly.

Hermione snorted again.

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this ..."

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it.

Severus laughed, scaring Neville half to death.

He asked if he knew how to get past Fluffy – and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocus' - reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell which Snape needs to break through – "

Snape smirked. "As if..." he muttered sarcastically.

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" said Hermione in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

"100 Ways" has a competition. The winner gets 100 points for their submission (see the latest chapter for details)...200 if I have trouble breathing from laughter. I will also post the winning submission at the end of the next chapter in that story, the author will of course get full credit. Happy Writing.

Mrs. Weasley smiled happily as Ron handed her the book. The smile remained until she read the title.

#### Chapter Fourteen: Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback

“What does a Norwegian Ridgeback have to do with Harry?” she asked.

“Mum, that’s like asking whether or not Harry’s ever had a good Halloween,” Ron explained. “First year, the troll attacked Hermione, and we nearly got killed. Second year, Mrs. Norris was petrified and Harry accused of doing it to her. Third year, someone tried to break into the Gryffindor Common room and the theory was that it was because of Harry being a Gryffindor. Fourth year, Harry’s name came out of the Goblet of Fire. And last year, the Umbi – I mean Umbridge was there, and his hand was sliced open from all the detentions she gave him.”

“Why would Harry’s hand be sliced open?” Molly asked in alarm.

“Tell her, Harry,” Ginny encouraged.

Harry sighed and stared at an invisible spot on the table. “She made me write lines with a blood quill while she told me what an attention-seeking, lying brat I was.”

“A BLOOD QUILL!” Sirius yelled, leaping to his feet. “Let me see your hand,” he ordered Harry in a softer tone, and approached him.

Harry showed his godfather his right hand.

“I must not tell lies,” Sirius whispered. “Why was someone like that allowed to teach?”

“Dumbledore couldn’t hire anyone else, and as the Ministry was trying to discredit both him and Harry, they decided to make laws to interfere at school. They said if Dumbledore couldn’t find someone to teach in time, they would appoint one. Then they made Umbridge, Hogwarts’ High Inquisitor, which gave her power over everyone,

because if they didn't do what she wanted, she'd make up a new law to force them," Hermione explained.

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "Dumbledore, so help me, if things don't change this time around, you will find yourself dead within a week of Umbridge's arrival at Hogwarts and Harry will be sent to Beauxbatons."

Dumbledore paled.

Sirius sat back down. "Please continue reading, Ma'am," he told Mrs. Weasley.

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe.

Severus snorted.

Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile,

"Ick," Harry said, shuddering. "I feel sick now."

...and Ron started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

"You're not the only one," Ron said, turning an odd shade of green.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and color-coding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

“That sounds like Remus,” James observed. “Only he suggested it a couple of times then left us alone.”

“Sounds like my friend Tim, as well,” Charles muttered. “We Potter’s seem to have a knack for befriending the brainy types.”

“Hermione, the exams are ages away.”

“Ten weeks,” Hermione snapped. “That’s not ages, that’s like a second to Nicolas Flamel.”

“Yes, but are you six hundred, Hermione?” Sirius asked.

“But we’re not six hundred years old,” Ron reminded her.

“YES!” Sirius shouted. “AT LAST I CAN CLAIM THE TITLE OF THE BIGGEST BLACK EMBARRASSMENT! I AM A SEER!”

“No,” Remus said. “You just happen to think like Ron does. Besides, did you run off with your next door neighbors’ cat, and claim to have married her in a small ceremony in Hawaii?”

“No,” Sirius moaned. “Damn Uncle Alphard for beating me to the title! Oh well...at least he left me money.”

“How’d he die anyway?” Harry asked, never having heard the story before.

“Oh,” Sirius said, “it turns out that he was allergic to his ‘wife’ and he went into anaphylactic shock.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. “Talk about ironic,” he muttered.

“May I continue,” Molly asked sweetly, a dangerous gleam in her eye.

The boys nodded quickly.

“Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it all.”

Fred sighed dreamily.

“No one knows everything,” Hermione said. “Just ask Professor Dumbledore.”

“As usual, you are quite right, my dear,” the Headmaster confirmed.

“What am I revising for? Are you mad? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into second year? They’re very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don’t know what’s gotten into me...”

“I never bother studying that much,” Harry muttered.

“Because you’re friends with Ron, and he doesn’t like to,” Hermione said.

Harry blushed. “No.”

“Why then, Harry?” Minerva asked.

“Habit,” he said, shrugging.

“Habit?”

“Yeah.” He looked embarrassed. “Whenever I did better than Dudley in school, I’d get in trouble. They’d say I was trying to make him look stupid. Eventually I just stopped trying. Besides,” he said, “Once I found out I was famous, the last thing I wanted was attention for being smart, so I decided not to bother. I did try on my OWLs though. No one will know my scores on them besides the professors and they won’t spread it around.”

“I look forward to seeing your results,” Minerva said.

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her to get through all their extra homework.

"Rotten time to be stuck there," Sirius moaned in sympathy. "That time of year has the best Quidditch weather."

James and the twins nodded solemnly.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up 'Dittany' in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

"That is odd," James said frowning.

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once.

"He's up to something," Lily muttered.

"An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Sorcerer's St –"

“Weasley, you are an idiot,” Draco said incredulously. “You don’t just go blabbing about secrets in public where anyone can hear you.”

“Shhhh!” Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. “Don’ go shoutin’ about it, what’s the matter with yeh?”

“See! Even Hagrid knows better,” Draco said, making Ron blush.

“There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact,” said Harry, “about what’s guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy – ”

“You aren’t much better than Ron at keeping secrets, Harry,” Neville said.

“SHHHH!” said Hagrid again. “Listen – come an’ see me later, I’m not promisin’ I’ll tell yeh anythin’, mind, but don’ go rabbitin’ about it in here, students aren’ s’posed ter know. They’ll think I’ve told yeh – ”

“See you later, then,” said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

“What was he hiding behind his back?” said Hermione thoughtfully.

“Good question,” Severus muttered.

“I think we’ll find out what it was soon, though,” Minerva said.

“Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?”

“I’m going to see what section he was in,” said Ron, who’d had enough of working.

He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

“Dragons!” he whispered.

Molly moaned loudly, as did Lily, Minerva and Severus.

“Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper’s Guide.”

“Hagrid’s got a dragon? This can’t be good,” Lily said solemnly.

“Hagrid’s always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him,” said Harry.

“ But it’s against our laws,” said Ron. “Dragon-breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks’ Convention of 1709, everyone knows that.

Everyone stared at Ron in shock. Then...

“IT’S A MIRACLE!” Fred proclaimed.

“A SIGN FROM THE DEITIES!” George yelled.

Sirius added his opinion. “HE’S POSSESSED!”

Harry shuddered

“HE’S GONE INSANE!” James announced.

“AND HE’S ACTUALLY THINKING!” Ginny cried out, causing the other Weasley children to scream in horror.

“Shut up!” Molly snapped then continued to read.

It’s hard to stop Muggles noticing us if we’re keeping dragons in the back garden – anyway, you can’t tame dragons, it’s dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie’s got off wild ones in Romania.”

“Charlie’s our older brother,” Ginny explained to the people from the past.



“I wish he’d come home and get a nice safe job...” Molly began.

“Don’t say ‘at the Ministry’,” Arthur said. “With the corruption there, I don’t want any more of our children to work there.”

Molly’s eyes widened. “Perhaps the dragons aren’t so bad after all,” she muttered, shocking the twins.

“But there aren’t wild dragons in Britain?” said Harry.

“Muggles,” Harry said, preventing the inevitable looks of shock.

“Of course there are,” said Ron. “Common Welsh Green and Hedridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our lot have to keep putting spells on Muggles who’ve spotted them, to make them forget.”

“So what on earth’s Hagrid up to?” said Hermione.

“Nothing good, I’m sure,” Severus said.

When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper’s hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed.

Lily moaned.

Hagrid called, “Who is it?” before he let them in and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stiflingly hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate.

“Not good, not good, not good,” Lily moaned.

“It can’t be that bad,” Luna said, comfortingly. “Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid are all still alive after all.”

It didn't seem to help.

Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

"So – yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," said Harry. There was no point in beating about the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Sorcerer's Stone apart from Fluffy."

Hagrid frowned at him.

"O' course I can't," he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn't tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It was almost stolen outta Gringotts – I s'ppose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know about Fluffy."

"Gee! How do you think?" Draco snapped.

"They met him of course," Sirius explained, not that anyone needed him to.

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice.

"Damn you're good," Fred said in admiration.

Hermione answered quite primly. "Thank you."

Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. "We only wondered who had done the guarding, really," Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

"Wow!" Sirius said in awe. "Fred, you'd better keep a hold of her. She's a keeper."

“Actually, she doesn’t play Quidditch,” Ron joked, making a few people snicker.

Hagrid’s chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione.

“Well, I don’ s’pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that...

Minerva moaned loudly. “The idiot! Really, he’s a sweet man, but this is too much!”

...let’s see...he borrowed Fluffy from me...then some o’ the teachers did enchantments...Professor Sprout – Professor Flitwick – Professor McGonagall - ” he ticked them off on his fingers. “Professor Quirrell – an’ Dumbledore himself did somethin’, o’ course. Hang on, I’ve forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape.”

“Snape?”

Severus smirked at Harry.

“Yeah – yer not still on abou’ that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he’s not about ter steal it.”

“He might not, but that doesn’t mean that no one is,” Harry said, knowingly.

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything – except, it seemed, Quirrell’s spell and how to get past Fluffy.

“You’re the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, aren’t you, Hagrid?” said Harry anxiously. “And you wouldn’t tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?”

“Not a soul knows except me an’ Dumbledore,” said Hagrid proudly.

“Oh, how I wish it were true,” Harry sighed.

“Well, that’s something,” Harry muttered to the others. “Hagrid, can we have a window open? I’m boiling.”

“Can’t, Harry, sorry,” said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it too.

“Hagrid – what’s that?”

“Oh, no,” Minerva moaned.

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

“At a school full of children, no less,” Lily groaned.

“Ah,” said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard. “That’s – er...”

“Where did you get it, Hagrid?” said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg.

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Good question.”

“It must’ve cost you a fortune.”

“Which Hagrid doesn’t have,” Severus said.

“Won it,” said Hagrid. “Las’ night. I was down in the villiage havin’ a few drinks an’ got into a game of cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Draco muttered sarcastically.

“Too much of a coincidence,” Severus whispered to himself, “someone knows.”

“But what are you going to do with it when it’s hatched?” said Hermione.

“At a school, no less,” Lily said again.

“Well, I’ve bin doin’ some readin’,” said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. “Got this outta the library – Dragon-Breeding for Pleasure and Profit – it’s a bit outta date, o’ course, but it’s all in here.

Remus shook his head in frustration. “This cannot end well.”

Keep the egg in the fire, ‘cause their mothers breathe on ‘em, see, an’ when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o’ brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour.

Sirius shuddered. “Absolutely disgusting!”

Draco and Neville nodded in agreement.

An’ see here – how ter recognise diff’rent eggs – what I got there’s a Norwegian Ridgeback. They’re rare, them.”

Dudley looked petrified by the entire story. “I wanna go home,” he moaned, real tears pouring down his face for the first time in years.

Though she couldn’t speak to comfort him, Petunia gathered her bulky son into a hug, and rubbed his back.

Harry quickly lowered his eyes from the scene and hoped no one had noticed his brief wistful look.

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn’t.

“Hagrid, you live in a wooden house,” she said.

But Hagrid wasn’t listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

“This cannot end well,” Lily said.

Neville replied, “It won’t.”

She looked horrified.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut.

“You should go to one of us,” Minerva said. “Let the adults handle it.”

“No offense, Professor,” Harry said. “But I have a hard time trusting adults, so why would I go to them for help.”

“Oh, Harry,” she moaned. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Wonder what it’s like to have a peaceful life,” Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra homework they were getting.

“I ask myself that question every day,” Harry said, getting looks of pity from almost everyone.

Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It’s hatching.

“Oh no,” Lily said.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn’t hear of it.

“Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?”

“Hopefully never,” Molly and Ree said together.

“We’ve got lessons, we’ll get into trouble, and that’s nothing to what Hagrid’s going to be in when someone finds out what he’s doing – ”

“Shut up!” Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn’t like the look on Malfoy’s face at all.

“This is bad,” Sirius said.

“Sorry, I was a jerk,” Draco said, shocking everyone because he hadn’t called himself an ass.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid’s with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the Forest.

“Hagrid is dead if Harry gets hurt. Friend or not,” James said, a determined glint in his eyes.

Hagrid greeted them looking flushed and excited.

“It’s nearly out.” He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped down on to the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body and it had a long snout with wide nostrils, stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

Remus looked impressed. "That's a very good description."

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured.

Lily's eyes went big and she muttered, "Beautiful?"

He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mummy!" said Hagrid.

"Mummy?" Minerva asked. "Has Hagrid gone mad?"

"Mad about dragons, maybe," Ron replied, rubbing the hand that had once been bitten.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face – he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains – it's a kid – he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.



Malfoy had seen the dragon.

“You are in such big trouble, mister,” Snape said, glaring at his godson.

Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy’s face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid’s darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

“At least you three are showing some sense,” Minerva said.

“Just let him go,” Harry urged. “Set him free.”

“I can’t,” said Hagrid. “He’s too little. He’d die.”

“Send him to a preserve,” Luna suggested.

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn’t been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

“Hagrid is in such big trouble when we get home,” Molly muttered.

“I’ve decided to call him Norbert,” said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes.

“Charlie is dead,” Molly growled. “He’s written to me about a dragon named Norbert before. I can’t believe he didn’t tell me about this.”

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light, and a stocky red haired man, with burn scars on his arms was standing in the room.

“Mum?” he asked in shock. “How did I get here?”

“Never you mind that, mister! How dare you not tell me that Hagrid had been trying to raise a baby dragon at the school!”

Charlie gulped nervously. “B-but Mum, he gave the dragon to the preserve, no harm done.”

“Hmph.”

After a moment, Charlie tried again, “So...where is here, and why am I here?”

Harry decided to explain. “Apparently, the Powers-that-be decided to let your Mum ream you out, and we are here to try to convince the Headmaster, who was taken from 1981, to not send me to the Dursleys. Have a seat.”

Charlie sat down, and everyone introduced themselves.

After they were done, Molly continued to read.

“He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where’s Mummy?”

“There is something really wrong with this picture,” Remus whispered to Sirius, who nodded in agreement.

“He’s lost his marbles,” Ron muttered in Harry’s ear.

“I quite agree,” Ree said.

“Hagrid,” said Harry loudly, “give it a fortnight and Norbert’s going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment.”

“My grandson is so smart,” Charles (not to be confused with Charlie) said proudly.

Hagrid bit his lip.

“I – I know I can’t keep him forever, but I can’t jus’ dump him, I can’t.”

Harry suddenly turned to Ron.

“Charlie,” he said.

“You’re losing it, too,” said Ron. “I’m Ron, remember?”

Sirius snickered behind his hand.

“No – Charlie – your brother Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!”

“Aha,” Charlie said, “So it was your idea! I knew Ron couldn’t’ve thought of it himself!”

“Hey!” Ron said.

“Harry is so smart,” Ginny said, pecking her boyfriend on his cheek.

“Oy! When did that happen?” Charlie asked.

“Several hours ago,” Harry said, blushing. “Please don’t kill me!”

“I won’t as long as you don’t hurt her,” Charlie promised.

Harry sighed in relief. “You’ll never have to kill me then. I don’t plan on ever hurting her if I can help it.”

A moment later, Molly continued reading.

“Brilliant!” said Ron. “How about it, Hagrid?”

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could owl to Charlie to ask him.

The professors all sighed in relief.

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's invisibility cloak.

"You have one of those?" Charlie breathed in awe. "That is so cool."

Harry grinned and nodded.

He had been down to Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief.

Molly growled like an angry mother bear, and Arthur, who was next to her, shifted a little closer to Charlie.

"I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

Charlie chuckled. "That explains a lot. Norbert, or rather, Norberta, as she's a girl, still can't sleep unless someone plays a lullaby for her."

There was a tap on the dark window.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!"

"Incidentally, she's the best post-owl I've ever met," Charlie said.

“Thanks,” replied Harry.

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter – I’d be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won’t be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they musn’t be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,  
Charlie

“You encouraged them to be out after curfew!” Molly snapped.

“Oh come on, Mum. They didn’t need any encouragement!”

“Hmph!”

They looked at each other.

“We’ve got the invisibility cloak,” said Harry. “It shouldn’t be too difficult – I think the cloak’s big enough to cover two of us and Norbet.”

“But it sure wouldn’t now!” Harry said, “It’s getting difficult to cover just one of us boys and Hermione, let alone all three of us.”

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert – and Malfoy.

There was a hitch.

“It figures,” Sirius moaned.

By next morning, Ron’s bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn’t know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey – would she recognize a dragon bite?

“Yes,” Hermione said. “She can also recognize a botched Polyjuice transformation. Damn cat hair!”

Sirius looked intrigued, but Remus nudged him with an elbow and shook his head, telling him not to ask.

By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert’s fangs were poisonous.

“Of course they are!” Charlie said, “All dragons are.”

Harry and Hermione rushed to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

“It’s not just my hand,” he whispered, “although that feels like it’s about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me – I’ve told her it was a dog but I don’t think she believes me – I shouldn’t have hit him at the Quidditch match, that’s why he’s doing this.”

“Actually, I was doing it because I was a git. Sorry!” Draco apologized yet again.

“So help me, Malfoy! If you don’t stop apologizing for the past, I’m gonna beat you up again!” Ron snapped.

“Or, better yet, I’ll do it for him,” Hermione said.

“I’ll stop,” Draco said in a squeaky voice. When Severus looked at him in shock, he explained. “She has a mean right hook!”

“I love you,” Fred sighed to his girlfriend.

“When did that happen?” Charlie asked confused.

“A few hours ago,” Ron muttered jealously.

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

“It’ll all be over at midnight on Saturday,” said Hermione, but this didn’t soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke into a sweat.

“Midnight on Saturday!” he said in a hoarse voice. “Oh no – oh no – I’ve just remembered – Charlie’s letter was in that book Malfoy took, he’s going to know we’re getting rid of Norbert.”

“What are the odds of that?” Sirius asked rhetorically.

“In my life,” Harry said, “those odds are pretty damn good.”

Harry and Hermione didn’t get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

“It’s too late to change the plan now,” Harry told Hermione. “We haven’t got time to send Charlie another owl and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We’ll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn’t know about that.”

They found Fang the boarhound sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

“I won’t let you in,” he puffed. “Norbert’s at a tricky stage – nothin’ I can’t handle.”

“It’s a good thing that half-giants are so resilient,” Charlie muttered, “any normal man wouldn’t have been able to handle a dragon anywhere near that long.”

When they told him about Charlie’s letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

“Aargh! It’s all right, he only got my boot – jus’ playin’ – he’s only a baby, after all.”

Several people snorted at that.

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle, feeling Saturday couldn’t come quickly enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say goodbye to Norbert if they hadn’t been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid’s hut because they had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he’d been playing tennis against that wall.

Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

“He’s got lots o’ rats an’ some brandy fer the journey,” said Hagrid in a muffled voice. “An’ I’ve packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely.”

“A teddy bear?” Charlie asked. “There wasn’t one of them in the crate.”



“Of course not,” Harry said. “Norbert ate it.”

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as though teddy was having his head torn off.

“See,” Harry said.

“Bye-bye, Norbert!” Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. “Mummy will never forget you!”

“You two are both grounded when you get home. You also, Ron,” Molly said. “Baby dragon...don’t know what you were thinking.”

“You aren’t their Mum, you can’t ground them,” Ron said.

“Just watch me!” she snapped.

“Ron, your Mum is a second mother to both of us,” Harry said, “right Hermione?”

“Yup,” she replied, “and loathe as I am to be punished, I think that gives her the right to help raise us.”

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer and nearer as they heaved Norbet up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. Up another staircase, then another – even one of Harry’s short cuts didn’t make the work much easier.

“My son knows the shortcuts already!” James said. “I’m so proud!”

Harry blushed.

“Nearly there!” Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the two outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hairnet, had Malfoy by the ear.

The Marauders snickered, as did the twins.

“Detention!” she shouted. “And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you – ”

“You don’t understand, Professor, Harry Potter’s coming – he’s got a dragon!”

Snape moaned, and shook his head. “This from a Slytherin! You should know that she’d never believe that.”

“What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on – I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!”

“I must remember to listen to people, even if their story is that bizarre,” Minerva muttered.

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they’d stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

“Malfoy’s got detention! I could sing!”

Fred suddenly leaned over and kissed his girlfriend, and grinned like an idiot.

“Don’t,” Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them.

Charlie grinned at the compliment to his friends.

They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going...going...gone.

Several people sighed in relief, though only Snape noticed that Harry, Neville, Hermione, and Ron were not among them.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them.

No more dragon – Malfoy in detention – what could spoil their happiness?

“Ask a stupid question...” Remus muttered

The answer to that was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

“...Get a stupid answer,” Sirius moaned out.

“Well, well, well,” he whispered, “we are in trouble.”

Half the room suddenly said, “Git!”

They'd left the Invisibility Cloak on top of the tower.

The Marauders groaned.

“We’re never forgetting it ever again,” Harry muttered.

“I’ll have you four de-gnoming the garden all summer!” Molly snapped. “Make that five of you,” she said looking at Draco, who gulped nervously.

Arthur took the book from Molly's hand to begin the next chapter.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Forbidden Forest

"Well, that can't be good," Sirius said, stating the obvious.

"Once again we hear another brilliant observation from Black," Severus said snidely.

Arthur rolled his eyes and continued to read.

Things couldn't have been worse.

"Yes, they could have," Harry stated.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last.

Harry mumbled, "I even considered telling her the truth, but I knew she wouldn't believe me."

He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak?

"And yet we still forgot it outside the Whomping Willow in third year," Hermione said. "You would think that we would have learned by then."

Harry sighed. "Well, we were worried about Ron."

"True," Hermione said.

There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in

the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes.

“You could have said that you went up there to snog,” Sirius volunteered.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look then both of them shuddered.

“Sirius! She’s as good as my sister! That’s just disgusting! No offense, Hermione,” Harry said.

“None taken,” Hermione replied. “That was a mental image I never want again though.”

Harry nodded in agreement.

Add Norbert and the invisibility cloak and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn’t have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

“Neville was out after curfew?” George asked incredulously. “I’m so proud of you!” He tackled Neville in a hug.

After a long moment, Neville was able to shove George off of him. “You know if you do things like that, people are going to start wondering if you’re gay,” Neville said.

George paled. “I’ll have you know that I am as straight as they come. Angelina would be happy to testify to that.”

Arthur decided to continue reading before Molly could get around to asking George questions that he (Arthur) really didn’t want to know the answers to.

“Harry!” Neville burst out, the moment he saw the other two. “I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag – ”

“Noooo!” Sirius cried out. “First rule of Marauding: never talk about questionable subjects when a professor is near.”

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

“I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. Its one o’clock in the morning. Explain yourselves.”

“That’ll never work,” Remus said. “What could they possibly say in their defense?”

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher’s question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

“I think I’ve got a good idea of what’s been going on,” said Professor McGonagall. “It doesn’t take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I’ve already caught him. I suppose you think it’s funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?”

“Now wait just one second!” James said. “That was just uncalled for!”

“Yeah, McGee, I’m disappointed in you,” Sirius agreed.

McGonagall turned red.

Harry caught Neville’s eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn’t true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville – Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

“Don’t worry, Harry. I understood,” Neville said.

“I’m disgusted,” said Professor McGonagall. “Four students out of bed in one night! I’ve never heard of such a thing before!

The Marauders began to laugh.

“You actually said that?” Remus said between laughs.

“Yeah,” James added, “That is the biggest pile of bat droppings. You’ve caught us loads of times.”

“Yes, well,” Minerva said. “I could hardly discourage your son from sneaking out after curfew in the future if I told him that his father was caught doing the same thing at least once a month.”

Harry’s jaw fell open. “Once a month! Even with the cloak, and the...other thing?”

James blushed. “Yes,” he said in a rather small voice.

“May I continue,” Arthur asked, and without bothering to wait for a response, he continued to read.

You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions – yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it’s very dangerous – and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor.”

“Wow! Harsh much?” Severus asked Minerva.

“You have no idea,” Harry told him, causing Severus to look confused.

“Fifty?” Harry gasped – they would lose the lead, the lead he’d won in the last Quidditch match.



“Fifty points each,” said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long pointed nose.

“That’s just cruel,” Severus said, for once sympathizing with the rule-breakers.

“Professor – please –”

“You can’t –”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I’ve never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students.”

“Don’t worry, Harry, she’s told us that loads of times,” Fred said, grinning. “She never means it.”

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they’d ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

“You blame yourself for everything,” Ginny said. “It’s not your fault.”

Harry stared at the table. He was quite used to those feelings of guilt.

Harry didn’t sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn’t think of anything to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they’d done?

Fred and George flinched. They remembered what happened, and it wasn’t pretty.

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hour-glass that recorded house points next day thought there’d been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Potter, the famous Harry

Potter, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first-years.

“All for doing the right thing,” Remus moaned.

From being one of the most popular and admired people at the school, Harry was suddenly the most hated.

McGonagall grimaced, feeling guilty herself.

Even Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on him, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the House Cup. Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, “Thanks Potter, we owe you one!”

Draco and Severus both groaned.

“Slytherin just keeps looking worse and worse,” Draco muttered, knowing that it was in no small part due to him.

Only Ron stood by him.

“They'll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they've been here, and people still like them.”

The twins nodded.

“They've never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?” said Harry miserably.

“Nope,” George said. “Sorry, Harry.”

“Well – no,” Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren't his business from now on.

“How’s that working for you, Harry?” Fred asked, grinning.

“I don’t do it on purpose!” Harry moaned. “It just happens to me!”

He’d had it with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign the Quidditch team.

“What good would that do?” Draco asked.

“Resign?” Wood thundered. “What good’ll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can’t win at Quidditch?”

But even Quidditch had lost its fun.

“Sacrilege,” Sirius snapped. “Quidditch should never lose its fun.”

The rest of the team wouldn’t speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him “the Seeker”.

“Sorry, mate,” Fred and George said together, both feeling guilty.

Hermione and Neville were suffering too. They didn’t have as bad a time as Harry, because they weren’t as well-known, but nobody would speak to them either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Harry was almost glad that the exams weren’t far away. All the studying he had to do kept his mind off his misery. He, Ron and Hermione kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart, memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions...

Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Harry’s new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn’t concern him was put to an unexpected test.

“That sounds ominous,” Remus muttered.

Walking back from the library on his own one afternoon, he heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As he drew closer, he heard Quirrell's voice.

“No – no – not again, please –”

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Harry moved closer.

“All right – all right –” he heard Quirrell sob.

“Why did you only hear one voice,” Severus asked.

“You’ll find out,” Harry said, shuddering.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom, straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry.

“Pathetic,” Sirius muttered.

He strode out of sight; Harry didn’t think Quirrell even noticed him. He waited until Quirrell’s footsteps had disappeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Harry was halfway towards it before he remembered what he’d promised himself about not meddling.

“Good boy,” Lily said, proud of him.

All the same, he’d have gambled twelve Philosopher's Stones that Snape had just left the room, and from what Harry had just heard, Snape would be walking with a new spring in his step – Quirrell seemed to have given in at last.

Severus arched a brow. “Who could it have been?” he muttered.

Harry went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Harry told them what he'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell –"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here, telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

"Harry's the alpha-male," Remus muttered under his breath.

Lily looked at him curiously and asked, "What do you mean, Remus?"

Remus jumped a little in his seat, not realizing that he had said it out loud. "Oh, I just mean that Harry is the unofficial leader of his group of friends....like James is for us." Remus blushed. "It's why I was never really able to stop him and Sirius when they were...well..."

"Being bullies," James filled in. "Call it what it was, Remus. We were bullies."

Lily's face brightened with understanding. "I get it. Because you're a werewolf, you quite literally couldn't stop them because James was the alpha-male. And that's also why you referred to Harry as alpha, because that's just the way you're used to referring to it."

Remus nodded but said nothing more.

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron's eyes, but Hermione answered before Harry could.

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure."

“It was a test for me. We wouldn’t have been thrown out; he just would have blown us off,” Harry explained.

“But we’ve got no proof!” said Harry. “Quirrell’s too scared to back us up. Snape’s only got to say he doesn’t know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor – who do you think they’ll believe, him or us? It’s not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore’ll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn’t help us if his life depended on it, he’s too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he’ll think. And don’t forget, we’re not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That’ll take a lot of explaining.”

“Too right. Especially since we’d have to do it in a way that wouldn’t get Hagrid in trouble,” Harry said, and Hermione nodded.

“Yes, and I doubt that even now we could come up with a good enough excuse as to how we found out everything,” she said.

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn’t.

“If we just do a bit of poking around –”

“Merlin, no please,” Lily muttered.

“No,” said Harry flatly, “we’ve done enough poking around –”

“Good boy,” Ree said. “I’m proud that you can stick to your promises.”

“Me too,” Charles said. “You’re a true Potter. Honor above all!”

He pulled a map of Jupiter towards him and started to learn the names of its moons.

The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry, Hermione and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight. Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Prof, M. McGonagall

"Why the entrance hall?" Ree asked.

"You don't want to know," Harry, Hermione, Neville and Draco said together. Dark looks covered each of their faces.

Harry had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they'd lost. He half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of revision lost, but she didn't say a word. Like Harry, she felt they deserved what they'd got.

Charles nodded in approval. Despite the fact that they had done the right thing; they still broke school rules, and their attitudes regarding the detention appealed to his Gryffindor heart.

At eleven o'clock that night they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there – and so was Malfoy.

Harry had also forgotten that Malfoy had got a detention, too.

"I deserved it," Draco said.

"Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

"The Forbidden Forest!" Molly snapped. "I knew that was the name of the chapter, but I didn't know that that was where they served detention! What on earth were you thinking?"

"I would never assign first years to serve detention in the Forbidden Forest," Minerva defended herself. "You must have meddled again!"

There was no doubting who she was referring to. Between her glares, and the Headmaster's blushing in embarrassment, it was obvious.

Arthur and Molly both looked at Albus angrily. They would have to do something about him when they got home.

“I bet you’ll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won’t you, eh?” he continued, leering at them. “Oh yes...hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me...It’s just a pity they let the old punishments die out...hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I’ve got the chains still in my office, keep ‘em well oiled in case they’re ever needed...Right, off we go, and don’t think of running off, now, it’ll be worse for you if you do.”

“Really, Albus! Filch just keeps overstepping his bounds! I know he’s a squib and can’t find work anywhere else, but this is too much!” Minerva said. “Filch just oughtn’t to be around children. I suggest that you either ask Aberforth to hire him to work in the bar, Merlin knows he’d fit in there; or else hire him to work in your own home.”

Albus knew that it wasn’t a suggestion.

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn’t be sounding so delighted.

Harry shuddered in remembrance.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid’s hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

“Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started.”

“Hagrid,” Lily said, and Ree and Molly both sighed in relief.

Harry’s heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn’t be so bad. His relief must have shown on his face, because Filch said, “I suppose you think you’ll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy – it’s into the forest you’re going and I’m much mistaken if you’ll all come out in one piece.”



Even Snape looked irate at this. Filch really was the wrong kind of person to have around children. He made the whole school look bad, and Hogwarts was supposed to be the best magical school in the world.

At this, Neville let out a little moan and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

“The forest?” he repeated, and he didn’t sound quite as cool as usual. “We can’t go in there at night – there’s all sorts of things there – werewolves, I heard.”

“And it now becomes obvious why no Malfoy in ten generations has made it into Gryffindor,” Charlie announced matter-of-factly. “No bravery whatsoever.”

Draco blushed but didn’t comment because really there is no contesting the truth.

Neville clutched the sleeve of Harry’s robe and made a choking noise.

“See,” Remus said, “even Neville looks to Harry to lead them. Harry is definitely the leader; it must be a Potter trait.”

Charles nodded. “It is.”

“That’s your problem, isn’t it?” said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. “Should’ve thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn’t you?”

“If it’s not the full moon then they have nothing to worry about,” Luna said dreamily. “Remus, could I take pictures of you during the transformation sometime?” she asked suddenly.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I don’t keep my mind during transformations. It’s dangerous,” Remus said.

“Actually,” Harry said. “Professor Snape invented a potion in 1984 that helps werewolves keep their minds during the full moon so they’re less dangerous. He makes it for you every month now.”

“If that’s true, then perhaps we can work something out,” Remus told Luna, smiling at her joy.

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

“Abou’ time,” he said. “I bin waitin’ fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?”

“I shouldn’t be too friendly to them, Hagrid,” said Filch coldly, “they’re here to be punished, after all.”

The Marauders rolled their eyes. “Git!” Sirius said.

“That’s why yer late, is it?” said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. “Bin lecturin’ them, eh? ‘Snot your place ter do that. Yeh’ve done yer bit, I’ll take over from here.”

“Good old Hagrid,” Luna murmured. “He’s a good friend.” Luna, like Harry, had taken instantly to the half-giant. She had few friends at school, and he’d befriended her the first time she asked if he’d ever seen a Snorkack.

“I’ll be back at dawn,” said Filch, “for what’s left of them,” he added nastily, and he turned and started back towards the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

“Git!” Lily snapped, surprising James. She usually didn’t say things like that.

“I love you,” he muttered, kissing her on the cheek.

She blushed prettily and said, “Love you too.”

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

“I’m not going in that forest,” he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

Harry snickered.

“Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts,” said Hagrid fiercely. “Yeh’ve done wrong an’ now yeh’ve got ter pay fer it.”

The twins clapped in appreciation.

“But this is servant stuff, it’s not for students to do.

Harry snorted at this. “Spoiled brat,” he muttered. Draco flushed, but knew that it was true.

I thought we’d be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he’d –”

“– tell yer that’s how it is at Hogwarts,” Hagrid growled. “Copyin’ lines! What good’s that ter anyone? Yeh’ll do summat useful or yeh’ll get out. If yeh think yer father’d rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an’ pack. Go on!”

Malfoy blushed. “I am so embarrassed,” he muttered.

Malfoy didn’t move. Ho looked at Hagrid furiously but then dropped his gaze.

“ Right then,” said Hagrid, “now, listen carefully, ‘cause it’s dangerous what we’re gonna do tonight an’ I don’ want no one takin’ risks. Follow me over here a moment.”

The word ‘dangerous’ had the parents exchanging nervous looks.

Dumbledore apparently thought that if he slouched, no one would notice him.

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high he pointed down a long narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

“Poetic sounding,” Charlie commented idly.

Several of the girls looked impressed. It wasn’t often that a manly man, such as him, noticed things like that. It was obvious why Charlie was popular with ladies.

“Look there,” said Hagrid, “see that stuff shinin’ on the ground? Silvery stuff? That’s unicorn blood. There’s a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We’re gonna try an’ find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery.”

“Oh,” Luna murmured, tears welling in her large eyes. “That poor creature.”

“And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?” said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

“There’s nothin’ that lives in the Forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang,” said Hagrid.

“Hagrid is so naïve sometimes,” Ginny muttered. “Sweet, but naïve.”

“An’ keep ter the path. Right, now, we’re gonna split inter two parties

“NO!” Dudley yelled suddenly.

Everyone had forgotten that he was there.

“That’s always how it starts out!” he moaned. “The group splits up, and then the creature starts killing them off! One! By! One!” He was breathing heavily as though he’d run a marathon.

Harry's mouth opened and shut in shock. That was the last thing he had expected to happen.

Arthur continued.

...an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've been staggerin' around since last night at least."

Draco handed Luna his handkerchief. She always took injured creatures to heart.

"I want Fang," said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang's long teeth.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid.

The Marauders and the twins found this highly amusing.

"So me, Harry an' Hermione'll go one way an' Draco, Neville an' Fang'll go the other.

"Well that's an accident waiting to happen," Molly muttered. "Harry can take care of himself, so he would have been better off assigned to Draco and Fang. Neville just wasn't up to it at that time. No offense, dear," she said.

"None taken," Neville said.

Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practise now – that's it – an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh – so, be careful – let's go."

"I give it five minutes, maybe ten before one of them sends up red sparks," Sirius said.

"I say twenty," James contested. "One Galleon on it, mate?"

"Deal." The two boys shook hands.

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path and Harry, Hermione and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

“Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?” Harry asked.

“No, not even werewolves are fast enough to do that. Besides we’re scared of unicorns when we’re in wolf form,” Remus said.

“Not fast enough,” said Hagrid. “It’s not easy ter catch a unicorn, they’re powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before.”

“See,” he said.

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

“You all right, Hermione?” Hagrid whispered. “Don’ worry, it can’t’ve gone far if it’s this badly hurt an’ then we’ll be able ter – GET BEHIND THAT TREE!”

“What?” Sirius yelled.

Hagrid seized Harry and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby; it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground.

Dudley shuddered and whimpered nervously.

Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

“I knew it,” he murmured. “There’s summat in here that shouldn’t be.”

Dudley whimpered again.

“A werewolf?” Harry suggested.

“Did it sound like a werewolf,” Remus asked sarcastically.

“That wasn’ no werewolf an’ it wasn’ no unicorn, neither,” said Hagrid grimly. “Right, follow me, but careful, now.”

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

“Who’s there?” Hagrid called. “Show yerself – I’m armed!”

And into the clearing came – was it a man, or a horse?

“A Centaur,” Lily breathed.

To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse’s gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione’s jaws dropped.

“Oh, it’s you, Ronan,” said Hagrid in relief. “How are yeh?”

He walked forward and shook the centaur’s hand.

“Good evening to you, Hagrid,” said Ronan. He had a deep sorrowful voice. “were you going to shoot me?”

“At least he’s got a sense of humor about it,” James commented. “He could have taken offense.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “You never want to piss off a Centaur. Just look at Umbridge,” he said to the other students.

“What happened to her?” Charlie asked, not having heard the story before.

“She called them a bunch of half-breeds,” Hermione began.

“She didn’t!” Charlie said.

“She did,” Harry confirmed.

“And they kidnapped her,” Hermione continued. “A day later, Professor Dumbledore went into the Forbidden Forest and rescued her.”

“She’s been catatonic ever since,” Ginny added. “Well...”

Ron smirked. “Except for when you do this...” he made a clip-clopping sound with his tongue.

“She about jumps ten feet into the air, and looks around wildly, then she starts talking to herself about hearing things,” Ginny finished.

Charlie couldn’t help but laugh. It was her own fault.

“Can’t be too careful, Ronan,” said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. “There’s summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter an’ Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An’ this is Ronan, you two. He’s a centaur.”

“Talk about stating the obvious,” Draco muttered.

“We’d noticed,” said Hermione faintly.

“Good evening,” said Ronan. “Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?”



“Erm –”

“That was me,” Harry said.

“A bit,” said Hermione timidly.

“A bit. Well, that’s something.” Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. “Mars is bright tonight.”

“It usually is,” Luna said.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid glancing up too. “Listen, I’m glad we’ve run inter yeh, Ronan, ‘cause there’s a unicorn bin hurt – you seen anythin’?”

Ronan didn’t answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upwards, then sighed again.

“Always the innocent are the first victims,” he said. “So it has been for ages past, so it is now.”

Harry sighed. “That’s the truth,” he muttered, thinking of Cedric. If anyone was innocent, it was the kind-hearted Hufflepuff boy.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid, “but have yeh seen anythin’, Ronan? Anythin’ unusual?”

“Mars is bright tonight,” Ronan repeated while Hagrid watched him impatiently. “Unusually bright.”

Remus moaned. “A straight answer would be nice here!”

“Yeah, but I was meanin’ anythin’ unusual a bit nearer home,” said Hagrid. “So yeh haven’t noticed anythin’ strange?”

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, “The forest hides many secrets.”

“That implies that whatever is hunting the unicorns is hiding, even from the other creatures in the forest,” Charles explained.

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and -bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

“Hullo, Bane,” said Hagrid. “All right?”

“Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?”

“Well enough. Look, I’ve jus’ bin askin’ Ronan, you seen anythin’ odd in here lately? Only there’s a unicorn bin injured – would yeh know anythin’ about it?”

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skywards.

“Mars is bright tonight,” he said simply.

“That line is getting old,” Draco muttered.

“We’ve heard,” said Hagrid grumpily. “Well, if either of you do see anythin’, let me know, won’t yeh? We’ll be off, then.”

Harry and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

“Never,” said Hagrid irritably, “try an’ get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy star-gazers. Not interested in anythin’ closer’n the moon.”

“Not true,” Harry said. “They’re also interested in people who intrude on their territory.”

“Are there many of them in here?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, a fair few...Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they’re good enough about turnin’ up if I ever want a word. They’re deep, mind, centaurs...they know things...jus’ don’ let on much.”

Sirius snorted. “That’s annoying. What’s the point of knowing things if you never use what you know?”

“Sirius,” Lily said. “I think that’s the smartest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

Sirius blushed and looked uncomfortable.

“D’you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?” said Harry.

“Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what’s bin killin’ the unicorns – never heard anythin’ like it before.”

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Harry kept looking over his shoulder. He had the nasty feeling they were being watched. He was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Hermione grabbed Hagrid’s arm.

“Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!”

“Well,” Sirius asked, “How long had it been since you entered the forest?”

Harry looked thoughtful. “About thirty minutes, yeah, Hermione?”

She nodded. “About that, Harry.”

“I was closer; I won the bet,” James said, and Sirius handed him a Galleon.

“You two wait here!” Hagrid shouted. “Stay on the path, I’ll come back for yeh!”

“No,” Lily moaned in frustration.

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn't hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

"You don't think they've been hurt, do you?" whispered Hermione.

"I don't care if Malfoy has, but if something's got Neville...It's our fault he's here in the first place."

"No it wasn't," Neville said. "It was my choice to leave the common room, therefore it was my fault."

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Harry seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid's return. Malfoy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Neville and grabbed him for a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"You idiot!" Snape snapped. "Haven't you ever heard the story of 'The Boy Who Cried Dragon'?"

Draco blushed but nodded his head. "I'm sorry, Uncle Severus. I'm sorry, Neville."

"We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you two were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups – Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' this idiot."

"At least Hagrid showed some intelligence this time," Snape muttered.

"I'm sorry," Hagrid added in a whisper to Harry, "but he'll have a harder time frightenin' you, an' we gotta get this done."

So Harry set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the Forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick.

Dudley moaned loudly. Obviously he'd seen a few too many horror films while at Smelting's.

Harry thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

Dudley moaned even louder than before.

"Look –" he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was a unicorn all right, and it was dead.

Luna was soaking Draco's handkerchief with her tears.

Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly white on the dark leaves.

"Oh," Lily sighed sadly.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered...

"Run for it!" Dudley yelled, making his mother jump in fright.

Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, it lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood.

Petunia threw up violently on the floor.

A moment later any sign of it had vanished, though Petunia's face was still an odd shade of green.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Dudley let out a high pitched scream like a little girl.

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted – so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry – unicorn blood was dribbling down its front.

All the women looked nauseated.

It got to its feet and came swiftly towards him – he couldn't move for fear.

“Run!” Dudley cried out again.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head, it was as though his scar was on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backwards. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over him, charging at the figure.

“Good,” Lily said, beginning to relax a little.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

“Are you all right?” said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

“Yes – thank you – what was that?”

Dudley shuddered, clearly not wanting to know the answer.

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar which stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"Why do they always do that," Harry moaned.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time – especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way."

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber on to his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a man on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Well that was insulting," Remus said. "He was just trying to help."

"I don't think they care about that," Harry said.

"Do you realise who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously.

"I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best," he said, in his gloomy voice.

"Yeah, Ronan, you tell him!" Sirius said, nodding in approval.

Bane kicked his legs in anger.

“For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!”

Remus coughed out something that sounded like ‘idiot’, but Harry couldn’t be sure he’d heard right.

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

“Do you not see that unicorn?” Firenze bellowed at Bane. “Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must.”

“Good for him!” Charlie said. “I like this fellow!”

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn’t have a clue what was going on.

“Humans normally don’t when it comes to Centaurs,” Luna said knowingly.

“Why’s Bane so angry?” he asked. “What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?”

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches but did not answer Harry’s questions.

“They usually don’t,” Luna said.

They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn’t want to talk to him any more. They were



passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

“Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?”

“Does anyone?” Lily asked. “I mean, only the worst sort of dark witch or wizard would kill a unicorn, so knowledge about their blood would only be found in the darkest of books, if at all.”

“No,” said Harry, startled by the odd question. “We’ve only used the horn and tail-hair in Potions.”

“That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn,” said Firenze. “Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.”

Absolutely everyone shuddered at this, the Dursleys included.

Harry stared at the back of Firenze’s head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

” But, who’d be that desperate?” he wondered aloud. “If you’re going to be cursed forever, death’s better, isn’t it?”

“Good, good,” Dumbledore said, impressed with young Harry’s wisdom. And for once, everyone ignored him.

“It is,” Firenze agreed, “unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else – something that will bring you back to full strength and power – something that will mean you can never die.

Everyone knew what that meant.

“The Elixer of Life,” Ginny murmured, saying what everyone was thinking.

Mr. Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?”

“The Sorcerer’s Stone! Of course – the Elixir of Life! But I don’t understand who –”

“Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?”

It was now Sirius’ turn to scream like a little girl.

“Voldemort!” James breathed, anger flashing in his eyes.

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry’s heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: “Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die.”

“Do you mean,” Harry croaked, “that was Vol –”

“Harry! Harry, are you all right?”

“And of course they are interrupted,” Lily muttered.

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along behind her.

“I’m fine,” said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying.

Hermione snorted. “You would say you were fine even if Voldemort himself was attacking you,” she muttered.

“The unicorn’s dead, Hagrid, it’s in that clearing back there.”

“This is where I leave you,” Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. “You are safe now.”

“I’m never safe,” Harry muttered.

Harry slid off his back.

“Good luck, Harry Potter,” said Firenze. “The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times.”

“Well, that’s ominous,” Minerva said, and she sniffed disdainfully.

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leaving Harry shivering behind him.

Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Harry roughly shook him awake.

In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the Forest.

Harry couldn’t sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

“Oh,” Lily murmured. “I wish I was there.”

Harry smiled sadly at her. He wished that too.

“Snape wants the stone for Voldemort...and Voldemort’s waiting in the Forest...and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich...”

Snape looked thoughtful. He was putting two and two together, and had at last come up with an answer that made sense.

“Stop saying that name!” said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Good for you, Harry," Lily said.

" Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done so...Bane was furious...he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen...They must show that Voldemort's coming back...Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me...I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

Lily shuddered.

"Will you stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the stone," Harry went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off...Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

James shuddered at this. No eleven year old should talk so calmly of his own possible death.

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of comfort.

"Harry, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

McGonagall herself nodded in agreement.

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed exhausted, their throats sore. But the night's surprises weren't over.

Dudley whimpered.

When Harry pulled back his sheets, he found his invisibility cloak folded neatly underneath them.

“Dumbledore,” Charles said matter-of-factly.

There was a note pinned to it:

Just in case.

“Duhn-Duhn-Duhn,” George said deeply.

“Shut up, George,” Ginny and Hermione said together.

50 Points: The first actress cast to play Bellatrix Lestrange was unable to take the part after all. What is her roll in the next Harry Potter movie?

Bonus: 10 bonus points if you can give her name.

Arthur handed the book to Charlie, who paused to pull a pair of reading glasses out of his pocket and put them on.

## Chapter Sixteen: Through the Trapdoor

Lily and the Marauders all moaned quite loudly.

In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment.

Charlie raised a brow at this, as Minerva muttered about idiot Headmasters who were trying to tempt Dark Lords into coming to a school.

Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was swelteringly hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

They had practical exams as well.

“Wow, talk about stating the obvious!” Draco muttered loudly.

Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox – points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers.

Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

“You scared Neville so bad that he nearly dropped a whole box of porcupine quills into his cauldron,” Harry told the professor.

Neville nodded in agreement, and Snape flinched.

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because Harry couldn't sleep,

“Aaww,” Lily and Ree said together, making the men roll their eyes.

...but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Everyone shivered at this, but no one more than Dudley who looked as though he was going to need a change of pants soon.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

“It's no wonder you were never any competition for me academically,” Hermione said to Harry, “if you had to deal with all this on top of the usual teenage problems. And you were holding back as well?”

“Erm, yeah,” Harry said, blushing. “I actually understand theory really well; I just tend to struggle with application. Though once I get a spell I never have trouble with it again.”

“Ahh,” Hermione said, “that does explain a lot. Though I must say that you don't struggle with the application when it's something you're interested in...like, say...the Patronus Charm.”

Harry blushed even harder than before, making his parents grin at him.

Their very last exam was History of magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out.

"A whole week of torture," Lily and Hermione both moaned...word-for-word, no less.

James and Harry rolled their eyes and grinned at each other.

When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"I don't blame you," the three Marauders said as one.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione, as they joined the crowds flocking out into the sunny grounds.

Even the professors stared at Hermione.

"Easy?" Snape asked.

Hermione said nothing, though Fred did. "That's my girl," he said, wrapping his left arm around her shoulders.

"I needn't have learnt about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct

Harry loudly muttered, "Damn bigots!"

Remus smiled a little teary eyed, though who could blame him. After having lived with the prejudice for over half his life, it was hard to believe when people were actually on his side.

...or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterwards, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree.



“The weeping willow?” James asked.

“Is there any other tree worth relaxing under?” Harry replied incredulously.

The two shared a grin.

“Honestly!” Lily said, “If everyone here didn’t know better, we’d think you were twins instead of father and son.”

Both of them blushed.

The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows.

“Ooh,” Luna said, “he likes it when people do that.”

“No more studying,” Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. “You could look more cheerful, Harry, we’ve got a week before we find out how badly we’ve done, there’s no need to worry yet.”

Lily and Molly both glared at Ron.

“What?!” he said loudly.

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

“I wish I knew what this means!” he burst out angrily. “My scar keeps hurting – it’s happened before, but never as often as this.”

“And it only started after I arrived at Hogwarts,” Harry said.

Snape’s eyes widened. He had a feeling...

“Go to Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione suggested.

“I’m not ill,” said Harry. “I think it’s a warning...it means danger’s coming...”

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

"Some friend you are," Draco snapped. "Bloody hell, why Harry is still friends with you is beyond me. Though, I suppose your loyalty outweighs the consequences of your laziness."

Ron blushed in embarrassment.

"Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Neville laughed at this. "I am dangerous on a broom," he admitted. "Can't control it at all."

Harry smiled at his friend. "Truthfully Neville, if you tried flying with the same level of confidence you showed at the end of this school year, I believe you'd be a great flyer."

Neville turned pink and muttered, "I don't know."

"Just think about it," Harry suggested. "You know I'd be happy to teach you if you're interested."

"Thanks, Harry. I will think about it."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important.

"Urgh," Lily said, "I hate those feelings."

Surprisingly, the still silenced Petunia nodded furiously in agreement.

When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

“I’ve done that before,” Lily muttered, further cementing the idea that Hermione was in fact Lily’s clone, at least to Harry anyway.

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn’t have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter towards the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was the only one who ever sent him letters.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Dudley asked in confusion.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy...never...but –

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

“Uh-oh,” Neville muttered. “Harry’s obviously had an epiphany.”

“Does that happen often?” Lily asked.

“Oh, about five times a year,” Ginny said.

“Where’re you going?” said Ron sleepily.

“I’ve just thought of something,” said Harry.

“Wow!” Draco said, “It’s a miracle! Harry can think!”

Harry found this very amusing, which was obvious from his laughter.

He had gone white. “We’ve got to go and see Hagrid, now.”

“Why?” panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

“Good question,” Sirius said, leaning forward a bit in anticipation.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit odd,” said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, “that what Hagrid wants more than anything is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it’s against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don’t you think? Why didn’t I see it before?”

“Holy Horse Manure!” Snape yelled.

“What are you on about?” said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds towards the forest, didn’t answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

“Hullo,” he said, smiling. “Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?”

McGonagall gave a small smile. “If nothing else, Hagrid is the sweetest man I have ever met, naïve yes, but sweet.”

Nearly all of the women in the room nodded in agreement.

“Yes, please,” said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

“Always thinking with your stomach,” Molly said to Ron fondly.

“No, we’re in a hurry. Hagrid, I’ve got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?”

“Good question,” Snape said, “but it’s unlikely that Hagrid saw the man’s face. Anyone dealing with contraband would not want anyone to know who he was.”

“Dunno,” said Hagrid casually, “he wouldn’t take his cloak off.”

“See,” he pointed out.

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

“It’s not that unusual, yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hog’s Head – that’s the pub down in the villiage.

Harry shuddered. “That place gives me the creeps.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Aberforth that you said that,” Dumbledore said, amused.

“NO WAY!” Hermione yelled.

Harry jaw fell open, and he stammered out, “Your brother, the one who got in trouble for using charms on some goats, he owns the Hog’s Head?”

The Headmaster chuckled. “Well, he certainly doesn’t run Durmstrang.”

Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn’ he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up.”

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas.

“What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?”

“Mighta come up,” said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember.

“Oh dear,” Minerva said. “I really must talk to Hagrid about his drinking habits. This is just too much.”

“Yeah...he asked what I did, an’ I told him I was gamekeeper here...he asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after...so I told him...an’ I said what I’d always really wanted was a dragon...an’ then...I can’ remember too well, ‘cause he kept buyin’ me drinks...

Minerva groaned, burying her face in her hands. A bottle of scotch appeared in front of her, along with a crystal tumbler.

She arched a brow, but poured herself a glass which she calmly knocked back like anyone born in Scotland would.

Let's see...yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted...but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn' want it ter go ter any old home...so I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy..."

Everyone but the three Dursleys groaned at this. Poor Dudley looked incredibly confused.

"And did he – did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Well – yeah – how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep –"

"Shit!" Severus yelled.

Draco wasn't much slower, saying, "Hell no!"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it!"

"Yeah, right," Charlie muttered. "That'll happen."

Hey – where're yeh goin'?"

"Where does he think they'd be going?" Charles muttered to Ree. "They're going to tell one of the teachers that the protections have been compromised."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that cloak – it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us.

"Of course I would, dear boy," the man in question said.

Harry arched a brow and muttered in a very Snape-like way, "Indeed?"

Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

"It depends on what week it is," Minerva muttered. "Damn inconvenient too. How a person's supposed to know where it is during an emergency is beyond me."

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"Erm," George said, "That's not entirely true..."

"What George means to say is," Fred said, "that while we hadn't been there officially by our third year..."

"We might have unofficially been there..."

"To set some things up," Fred finished.

Dumbledore looked shocked. His jaw fell open, causing a lemon drop to fall out and into his beard where it refused to budge for well over an hour.

“We’ll just have to –” Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

“What are you three doing inside?”

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

“Good,” Lily said, then turned to Minerva. “You can tell them where the office is.”

“We want to see Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry thought.

“I was sorted into Gryffindor and not Ravenclaw for a reason you know,” Hermione said.

“See Professor Dumbledore?” Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. “Why?”

“Well, first year students don’t usually ask to speak to the Headmaster,” she defended herself.

Harry swallowed – now what?

“It’s sort of secret,” he said,

“Bad idea,” Remus moaned.

...but he wished at once he hadn’t, because Professor McGonagall’s nostrils flared.

“Yikes,” Charles said, recoiling a little. “That’s just scary.”

“Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago,” she said coldly. “He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once.”



“You idiot!” Minerva snapped. “You are a fool to leave the school based on an owl! Honestly, if the Minister of Magic needed you that badly, he would have flooded!”

Dumbledore shrank back from her. An angry Minerva McGonagall was a Minerva McGonagall to avoid.

“He’s gone?” said Harry frantically. “Now?”

“I quite agree,” Severus said silkily.

“Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time –”

“Too true,” Dumbledore himself said.

“Then perhaps you should retire from Hogwarts, and let someone whose priority is the school in charge. Like, say, Professor McGonagall,” Harry suggested.

Dumbledore flushed in embarrassment. Minerva looked thoughtful.

“But this is important.”

“Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Potter?”

“Ask a stupid question,” Minerva muttered to herself.

“Look,” said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, “Professor – it’s about the Sorcerer’s Stone –”

“This won’t go well,” Sirius said.

James and Remus nodded in agreement.

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn’t that.

“Who would expect something like that?” she asked rhetorically.

The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms but she didn’t pick them up.

“How do you know –?” she spluttered.

“Gee, how do you think we know it?” Ron muttered sarcastically.

“Professor, I think – I know – that Sn – that someone’s going to try and steal the Stone. I’ve got to talk to Professor Dumbledore.”

“Two-way mirrors would have been nice right about then,” Harry commented.

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

“Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow,” she said finally. “I don’t know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it’s too well protected.”

“Did I honestly believe that?” she asked. “I can’t believe that I could be that naïve.”

“But Professor –”

“Potter, I know what I’m talking about,” she said shortly.

McGonagall groaned. LOUDLY.

She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. “I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine.”

“Yeah, like that’ll happen,” Draco said his words dripping with sarcasm.

But they didn’t.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Ree asked no one in particular.

Luna replied, “Because the orange-puffskeins-of-doom aren’t here.”

“It’s tonight,” said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. “Snape’s going through the trapdoor tonight. He’s found out everything he needs and now he’s got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up.”

“Why aren’t you in Slytherin?” Snape moaned to Harry, who chose not to respond.

“But what can we –”

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

“That can’t be good,” Dudley muttered, and began to try to crawl into his mother’s lap as he started sucking his thumb.

Snape was standing there.

Severus muttered, “This is bad.”

“Good afternoon,” he said smoothly.

“You’re scary, you know that, right?” Ron said. “Really scary.”

Snape smirked.

They stared at him.

“You shouldn’t be inside on a day like this,” he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

“Mummy, he scares me,” Sirius whimpered. He suddenly jumped out of his seat, and running around the table, climbed onto Ree’s lap.

Ree looked shocked, even more so once Sirius started sucking his thumb.

“What is this, a trend?” Charles asked.

“We were —” Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

“Not a good idea, either,” Harry explained. “You should always have a plan when dealing with a Slytherin. Well...unless that Slytherin is a Malfoy. Then it’s okay to do things on the spur-of-the-moment.”

Draco gave him a rude gesture, but stopped and shrank in his seat when Mrs. Weasley glared at him.

“You want to be more careful,” said Snape. “Hanging around like this, people will think you’re up to something. And Gryffindor really can’t afford to lose any more points, can they?”

“Jerk,” Lily muttered.

Harry flushed. They turned to go back outside, but Snape called them back.

“Be warned, Potter — any more night-time wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you.”

“Wait...you wished them a ‘good day’ after threatening them? Are you nuts?” James asked.

“Well, yes,” Snape said, “but that’s beside the point.”

He strode off in the direction of the staff room.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others.

“Right, here’s what we’ve got to do,” he whispered urgently. “One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape — wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you’d better do that.”

“Why?” Lily asked.

“Because she can pretend to be waiting to ask one of the professors an exam question. Harry and Ron couldn’t do that because they weren’t all that academically inclined,” Luna explained logically.

“Why me?”

“It’s obvious,” said Ron. “You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know.” He put on a high voice, “Oh Professor Flitwick, I’m so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong...”

Everyone laughed at that, even Hermione. It was not that out-of-character for her to do something like that.

“Oh, shut up,” said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

“And we’d better stay outside the third-floor corridor,” Harry told Ron. “Come on.”

“Ooh, bad idea,” Charlie said. “Professor McGonagall will probably have people patrolling just-in-case, you know.”

But that part of the plan didn’t work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again, and this time, she lost her temper.

“See,” he said.

“I suppose you think you’re harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!” she stormed. “Enough of this nonsense! If I hear that you’ve come anywhere near here again, I’ll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!”

“Well, with someone after the Stone, it would be quite dangerous for a bunch of first years to be there,” Lily defended the professor.

Harry and Ron went back to the common room. Harry had just said, "At least Hermione's on Snape's tail," when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

"Well, that's ironic," Remus muttered.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she wailed. "Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him, and I've only just got away. I don't know where Snape went."

"I was a spy. I know when someone is tailing me," Severus said, smirking.

"Well that's it then, isn't it?" Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

"Uh-oh," Charles said. "I know that look. Ree gets it all the time, it means trouble."

"Thank you, dear," Ree said.

"I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."

Minerva moaned yet again.

"You're mad!" said Ron.

"I agree," Snape said.

"You can't!" said Hermione. "After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"

"Exactly," Minerva said, though she knew it would do no good.

“SO WHAT?” Harry shouted. “Don’t you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort’s coming back! Haven’t you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won’t be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He’ll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn’t matter any more, can’t you see? D’you think he’ll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I’ll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there. It’s only dying a bit later than I would have done, because I’m never going over to the Dark Side! I’m going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?”

Dumbledore had begun to fear that Voldemort might be corrupting Harry via the curse scar when he heard what Harry said about what Voldemort would do to the school. It was incredibly insightful, and it scared him. Then, however, Harry redeemed himself in Dumbledore’s mind by declaring what he did about never turning dark.

Lily and James both looked uncomfortable when their deaths were brought up again, but no one could blame them for that.

Molly looked near to tears at this point, as did Minerva.

Charlie just continued reading.

He glared at them.

“You’re right, Harry,” said Hermione in a small voice.

“It’s a miracle!” George declared.

“Hermione admitted that Harry was right!” Fred teased.

Hermione playfully smacked her boyfriend’s arm, but otherwise didn’t respond.

“I’ll use the Invisibility Cloak,” said Harry. “It’s just lucky I got it back.”

“It wasn’t luck,” Luna said.

Remus finished her thought, “It was Dumbledore.”

“Too right,” Harry agreed.

“But will it cover all three of us?” said Ron.

Arthur looked proud of his son.

“All – all three of us?”

“Harry is a born leader and he doesn’t even realize it,” Remus muttered, shaking his head.

“Oy, Potter,” Draco said, catching his attention, “Thanks for refusing to be a Slytherin. If you had been, I would have been out of luck as leader of our house.”

“Oh, come off it, you don’t think we’d let you go alone?”

“Of course not,” said Hermione briskly. “How do you think you’d get to the Stone without us? I’d better go and look through my books, there might be something useful...”

“I’m noticing a trend here,” Hermione said. “Harry only accepts help when it becomes clear that he doesn’t have any other option. I think it’s a side-effect of being isolated during his childhood thanks to those idiots,” she indicated the Dursleys. “That’s not good at all,” she concluded.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful, and mildly ill.

“But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too.”



“Not if I can help it,” said Hermione grimly. “Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They’re not throwing me out after that.”

“Erm, wow,” Draco said. “No wonder I never stood a chance of being top in our year. I was lucky to even come close to being fourth because of you,” he pointed at Hermione. “You being top in the year, and helping Potter and Weasley got them into the second and third slots.”

Hermione smirked at him.

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Harry anymore, after all.

Minerva flinched, remembering the points she took from them.

This was the first night he hadn’t been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try and break.

“In a first year text book?” Sirius said, finally climbing off of Ree’s lap. “You’re nuts.” He returned to his seat.

Harry and Ron didn’t talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

“Better get the cloak,” Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormitory. He pulled out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy – he didn’t feel much like singing.

“I don’t blame you,” Lily said in sympathy.

He ran back down to the common room.

“We’d better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us – if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own –”

Luna giggled at this.

“What are you doing?” said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he’d been making another bid for freedom.

“Interesting,” Severus commented idly.

“Nothing, Neville, nothing,” said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

“Yeah, that’ll work,” Draco sneered.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

“You’re going out again,” he said.

“Way to state the obvious,” the Slytherin continued.

“No, no, no,” said Hermione. “No, we’re not. Why don’t you go back to bed, Neville?”

James muttered, “And that’s not suspicious at all,” in a sarcastic tone.

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn’t afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

“You can’t go out,” said Neville, “you’ll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble.”

Minerva looked impressed.

“You don’t understand,” said Harry, “this is important.”

“I wish I’d listened to you,” Neville said.

Harry grinned. “Yeah...if you had come with us the whole thing would have been easier.”

Neville looked confused.

“You’ll find out soon,” Harry said.

Hermione just blushed.

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

“Go Neville,” James said, impressed.

“I won’t let you do it,” he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. “I’ll – I’ll fight you!”

The Marauders applauded, and Minerva said, “A true Gryffindor!” with pride.

“Neville,” Ron exploded, “get away from that hole and don’t be an idiot –”

Molly’s back stiffened. “You’re grounded for the rest of the summer!” she snapped. “He was trying to do the right thing, and you called him an idiot!”

Ron shrank back from his mother in fear.

“Don’t you call me an idiot!” said Neville. “I don’t think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!”

“Good for you, Neville,” Draco said, sounding impressed.

“Yes, but not to us,” said Ron in exasperation. “Neville, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

“Go on then, try and hit me!” said Neville, raising his fists. “I’m ready!”

“Frank and Alice would be so proud,” Lily said to Neville who was blushing.

Harry turned to Hermione.

“Do something,” he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

“Neville,” she said, “I’m really, really sorry about this.”

She raised her wand.

“Petrificus Totalus!” she cried, pointing it at Neville.

“Marry me?” Fred sighed happily.

Hermione just blushed.

Neville’s arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

“Ouch,” Sirius said.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville’s jaws were jammed together so he couldn’t speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

“I am so sorry,” Hermione said, looking distraught.

“Its okay, Hermione,” Neville said, “really.”

“What’ve you done to him?” Harry whispered.

“It’s the full Body-Bind,” said Hermione miserably. “Oh, Neville, I’m so sorry.”

“And to think,” Draco said in awe, “I used to wonder why people were scared of you, Granger.”

Hermione looked uncomfortable.

“We had to, Neville, no time to explain,” said Harry.

“You’ll understand later, Neville,” said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the Invisibility Cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn’t feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue’s shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them.

“I don’t blame you for feeling that way,” Remus said. “We once hexed Marvin Edgecombe to keep him from stopping us leaving for the full moon. We felt the same way you did.”

The other two seventeen year olds nodded.

At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

“Oh, let’s kick her, just this once,” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear, but Harry shook his head.

“That’s my boy,” Lily said in pride.

As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamp-like eyes on them, but didn’t do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Ooh," Minerva said. "One of these days I'll figure out how to exorcise him, just you wait," she said menacingly.

The Marauders and the twins all looked a little scared at this.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you a ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

"Should call Filch, I should, if something's a-creeping around unseen."

"That can't be good," James muttered.

Harry had a sudden idea.

"Peeves," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible."

Everyone stared at Harry in awe.

"Brilliant," the twins declared together.

Draco couldn't help but look impressed, and Severus began wishing that Harry was in his house.

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

"So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, sir," he said greasily. "My mistake, my mistake – I didn't see you – of course I didn't, you're invisible – forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir."

“Impressive,” Charles said.

“I have business here, Peeves,” croaked Harry. “Stay away from this place tonight.”

“I hereby nominate Harry James Potter to join the illustrious and famous Marauders,” Sirius said, standing up. “All in favor?”

James, Remus and the twins all raised their hands.

“Harry James Potter is hereby to be known as ‘Nightstalker’,” Sirius said.

“I like that name,” James commented.

Charlie rolled his eyes, and continued to read.

“I will, sir, I most certainly will,” said Peeves, rising up in the air again. “Hope your business goes well, Baron, I’ll not bother you.”

And he scooted off.

“Brilliant, Harry!” whispered Ron.

“Slytherin cunning at its best,” Severus said silkily, making Harry blush

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor – and the door was already ajar.

Some of the adults exchanged looks of fear.

“Well, there you are,” said Harry quietly. “Snape’s already got past Fluffy.”

Snape rolled his eyes at this.

Seeing the open door seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

“If you want to go back, I won’t blame you,” he said. “You can take the cloak, I won’t need it now.”

“Don’t be stupid, Potter,” Draco said. “You need their help, and you know it.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ron.

Sirius snickered.

“We’re coming,” said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog’s noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn’t see them.

Dudley whimpered in fear.

“What’s that at its feet?” Hermione whispered.

“Looks like a harp,” said Ron. “Snape must have left it there.”

“This is bad,” Severus said. “Three first years against a Death Eater! This is madness!”

“It must wake up the moment you stop playing,” said Harry. “Well, here goes...”

He put Hagrid’s flute to his lips and blew. It wasn’t really a tune, but from the first note the beast’s eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog’s growls ceased – it tottered on its paws and fell on its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

Molly looked scared. She and Arthur had never been told the entire story of what happened; probably because Dumbledore didn’t know,



and later because Ron was too scared to tell them for fear of punishment.

“Keep playing,” Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog’s hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads.

“Ick,” Lily said, looking a little green.

“I think we’ll be able to pull the door open,” said Ron, peering over the dog’s back. “Want to go first, Hermione?”

“What a gentleman,” Fred said sarcastically.

“How brave,” George added.

“No, I don’t!”

“All right.” Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog’s legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

“What can you see?” Hermione said anxiously.

“Nothing – just black – there’s no way of climbing down, we’ll just have to drop.”

Dudley let out a high-pitched girlish scream.

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his attention and pointed at himself.

“You want to go first? Are you sure?” said Ron. “I don’t know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep.”

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds' silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Luna for some odd reason began to hum 'Weasley is Our King' again.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, "If anything happens to me, don't follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?"

"So brave," Lily murmured.

"Right," said Ron.

"See you in a minute, I hope..."

And Harry let go.

Molly looked terrified.

Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and –

FLUMP. With a funny sort of thump he landed on something soft.

"That's a relief," Minerva murmured.

He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"Shit!" Neville said loudly. "That can't be good!"

"It's OK!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor. "It's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Draco looked confused about what a postage stamp was, but chose not to ask.

Ron followed straight away. He landed sprawled next to Harry.

“What’s this stuff?” were his first words.

“Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it’s here to break the fall.

Neville began muttering to himself about different possible plants that it could have been.

Come on, Hermione!”

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry’s other side.

“We must be miles under the school,” she said.

“Lucky this plant thing’s here, really,” said Ron.

“How thick can you be?” Severus sneered.

“Lucky!” shrieked Hermione. “Look at you both!”

“Hmm,” Neville said under his breath.

She leapt up and struggled towards a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snake-like tendrils around her ankles.

“Ahah!” Neville said loudly. “It’s Devil’s Snare! It has to be!”

Those who knew what it was, looked worried.

As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her.

Several people breathed sighs of relief.

Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound round them.

Neville's eyes went wide. "You don't fight Devil's Snare!" he declared loudly and incredulously.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is – it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant curling around his neck.

"Rude much?" George asked Ron.

"Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Hermione.

"Light a fire," Neville said, unable to believe that they hadn't thought of that before.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" gasped Harry, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare...what did Professor Sprout say? It likes the dark and the damp –"

"So light a fire!" Harry choked.

"THANK YOU!" Neville said, glad that someone got it.

"Yes – of course – but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

“WHAT?” Lily said loudly. “Use MAGIC!”

Hermione looked like a tomato.

“HAVE YOU GONE MAD?” Ron bellowed. “ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?”

“Oh, right!” said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant.

Neville and Lily breathed sighs of relief.

In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies and they were able to pull free.

“Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione,” said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “and lucky Harry doesn’t lose his head in a crisis – ‘there’s no wood’, honestly.”

“You’ve got to learn how to think on your feet, Hermione,” Harry said.

“I know,” she muttered miserably.

“This way,” said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downwards and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards’ bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon – Norbert had been enough...

Dudley moaned loudly then wailed, "I'm never leaving my room again!"

"Thank Merlin," Harry said. "Now the neighborhood kids won't have to worry about being beaten up."

Petunia glared viciously. If she had been able to talk, she would have blamed Harry for the beatings of the kids in Little Whinging.

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rushing and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"Does it sound like a ghost?" Remus asked rhetorically.

"I don't know...sounds like wings to me."

"And Harry would know too," Ginny said proudly. "He's the best Seeker Hogwarts has ever seen. And he doesn't just rely on his eyesight, but also on his other senses."

Harry blushed at this praise.

"There's a light ahead – I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy, wooden door.

"Flitwick do you think?" Severus asked.

"Of course," Minerva replied. "No one else would do something that beautiful and complex."

“Do you think they’ll attack us if we cross the room?” said Ron.

“No,” Snape said. “That’s not his way.”

“Probably,” said Harry. “They don’t look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once...well, there’s nothing for it...I’ll run.”

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened.

“See,” Severus said smugly.

He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

“Ahah,” Severus said, figuring it out.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn’t budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm.

“Filius wouldn’t make it that easy,” Minerva said.

“Now what?” said Ron.

“These birds...they can’t be here just for decoration,” said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering – glittering?

“They’re not birds!” Harry said suddenly. “They’re keys! Winged keys – look carefully. So that must mean...” he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. “...yes – look! Broomsticks! We’ve got to catch the key to the door!”

“Oh, that’ll be easy for ickle-Harrykins,” George said with brotherly pride.

“But there are hundreds of them!”

Ron examined the lock on the door.

“We’re looking for a big, old-fashioned one – probably silver, like the handle.”

“At least one of you tried to narrow down the search,” Draco sneered.

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn’t. After a minute’s weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

“Excellent,” Charles declared.

“That one!” he called to the others. “That big one – there – no, there – with bright blue wings – the feathers are all crumpled on one side.”

“Brilliant,” James said in awe.

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling and nearly fell off his broom.

Ron flinched and blushed in embarrassment, making Draco laugh at him.

“We’ve got to close in on it!” Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. “Ron, you come up at it from above – Hermione, stay below and stop it going down – and I’ll try and catch it. Right, NOW!”



“Definitely Quidditch Captain material,” Charles said.

The three Marauders all nodded in agreement, as did Professor McGonagall.

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upwards, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand.

“Go Harry!” the twins cheered, leaping around like cheerleaders.

“Sit down!” their mother hissed in embarrassment.

Ron and Hermione’s cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly and Harry ran to the door, the key struggling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned – it worked.

The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

“Ready?” Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door handle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn’t see anything at all.

Dudley whimpered, and even Draco looked nervous.

But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

“What? What?” Sirius asked in excitement.

“If you’d just shut up, we could find out,” Snape hissed angrily.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone.

“Ahh,” Minerva said, “that is my work.”

Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shivered slightly – the towering white chessmen had no faces.

“Now what do we do?” Harry whispered.

“It’s obvious,” Draco said. “You play your way across the board.”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” said Ron. “We’ve got to play our way across the room.”

“Now this is just starting to get creepy,” the blonde Slytherin muttered.

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

“How?” said Hermione nervously.

“How do you think?” Draco said with a sneer.

“I think,” said Ron, “we’re going to have to be chessmen.”

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight’s horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

“Do we – er – have to join you to get across?”

The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

“This needs thinking about...” he said. “I suppose we’ve got to take the place of three of the black pieces...”

“Obviously,” Snape said.

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess –"

"We're not offended," said Harry quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Wish my friends acted that way," Draco muttered. "You know, respecting each others talents and all that."

The others looked at him with pity.

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, you go next to him instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Ron.

"Oh, Ron," George said in a high, feminine voice, "Be my knight in black stone armor." He dropped onto a knee by Ron's chair.

Ron smacked his brother on the head and said, "Shut up!"

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board leaving three empty squares which Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board. "Yes...look..."

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

"And so it begins," Harry said, somewhat melodramatically.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry's knees were trembling. What if they lost?

Ron scoffed at that. "I never lose!"

“Harry – move diagonally four squares to the right.”

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, face down.

“What if it happens to one of them?” James asked his smarter friend.

Remus shrugged.

“Had to let that happen,” said Ron, looking shaken. “Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on.”

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy.

The Marauders all looked pale and a little grim.

Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger.

“Nice friend,” Luna said, seriously. Most other people would have said that sarcastically, but not her.

He himself darted around the board taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

“We’re nearly there,” he muttered suddenly. “Let me think – let me think...”

The white queen turned her blank face towards him.

“Yes...” said Ron softly, “it’s the only way...I’ve got to be taken.”

“WHAT?” Molly yelled. “You! You!” She pointed at the Headmaster, shaking in fury. What followed was a lesson in many different combinations of cuss words.

She even taught Charlie some new ones.

After a while, Arthur calmed her down, and the story continued.

“NO!” Harry and Hermione shouted.

Draco looked wistful.

“That’s chess!” snapped Ron. “You’ve got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she’ll take me – that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!”

“Oh, my baby is so brave,” Molly murmured, and began hugging Ron tightly.

“But –”

“Do you want to stop Snape or not?”

“Ron –”

“Look, if you don’t hurry up, he’ll already have the Stone!”

There was no alternative.

“Ready?” Ron called, his face pale but determined. “Here I go – now, don’t hang around once you’ve won.”

“Good thing he told them that,” Draco said. “Knowing their loyalty to each other, they would have waited with him until he could go on if he hadn’t.”

He stepped forward and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard around the head with her stone arm and he crashed to the floor – Hermione screamed but stayed on her square – the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he’d been knocked out.

“Oh,” Molly murmured, still hugging Ron who was starting to turn blue.

“Oy, Mum, look at Ron’s face,” George said.

She did and said, “Oh goodness, Ron, I’m sorry.”

“S’okay Mum,” Ron said, just relieved to be able to breathe again.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry’s feet. They had won.

Minerva looked to be in shock. “A first year beat me at chess,” she stated, her eyes wide and unblinking.

Severus poured her some more scotch which she downed gratefully. It seemed to help too, as she looked more alert.

The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

“What if he’s –?”

“He’ll be alright,” said Harry, trying to convince himself. “What do you reckon’s next?”

“Good question,” Remus said.

“We’ve had Sprout’s, that was the Devil’s Snare; Flitwick must’ve put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell’s spell, and Snape’s...”

“Wow,” Lily looked impressed. “Nice deduction work, Hermione,” she said.

“Thanks,” the bushy-haired witch replied.

They had reached another door.

“All right?” Harry whispered.

“Go on.”

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses.

Sirius screamed like a little girl. “It’s a troll!” He screamed again.

Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

Luna looked ill at this which, considering she usually had a stomach of steel, was saying something.

“I’m glad we didn’t have to fight that one,” Harry whispered, as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. “Come on, I can’t breathe.”

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next – but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

“Interesting,” Snape muttered.

“Snape’s,” said Harry. “What do we have to do?”

They stepped over the threshold and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn’t ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onwards. They were trapped.

Dudley whimpered. "Next it'll be a mysterious voice then they'll be picked off. One – at – a – time," he said in a shaky voice.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,  
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,  
One among us seven will let you move ahead,  
Another will transport the drinker back instead,  
Two of our number hold only nettled wine,  
Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.  
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,  
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:  
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide  
You will always find some on nettles wine's left side;  
Second, different are those who stand at either end,  
But if you would move onwards, neither is your friend;  
Third, as you see clearly, are all different size,  
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;  
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right  
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

George pulled out his notebook and began muttering as he tried to decipher the clues, but he got stuck as he didn't know where the large and small bottles were in the line-up.

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

"Brilliant," said Hermione. "This isn't magic – it's logic – a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

Severus smirked at all the stares he was getting.

"But so will we, won't we?"



“Of course not,” said Hermione. “Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple.”

No one dared interrupt at this point. They wanted to know if Hermione could do it.

“But how do we know which to drink?”

“Give me a minute.”

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

“Got it,” she said. “The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire – towards the Stone.”

Severus beamed at her in pride.

Hermione looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

“There’s only enough there for one of us,” he said. “That’s hardly one swallow.”

They looked at each other.

“Which one will get you back through the purple flames?”

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

“You drink that,” said Harry.

The adults all looked scared at this. A first year facing a Death Eater...by himself!

“No listen – get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room, they’ll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy – go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I’m no match for him really.”

“At least you recognize when you are in need of assistance, though I wish you’d thought of that sooner,” Snape said.

“But, Harry – what if You-Know-Who’s with him?”

No one, outside of the trio and Neville, had thought of that.

“Well – I was lucky once, wasn’t I?” said Harry, pointing at his scar. “I might get lucky again.”

Sirius sniggered. “Get lucky!” he said through his laughter.

He was promptly smacked by one Lily Evans.

Hermione’s lip trembled and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

“Aww,” Molly and Ree said together. “That’s so sweet.”

“Hermione!”

“Harry – you’re a great wizard, you know.”

“I’m not as good as you,” said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

“Me!” said Hermione. “Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be careful!”

“Wow! Never thought I’d hear that from Hermione Granger,” Charlie muttered in shock. “More important things than books? Merlin, I must be hallucinating.”

“You drink first,” said Harry. “You are sure which is which, aren’t you?”

“Positive,” said Hermione. She took a drink from the round bottle at the end and shuddered.

“It tasted positively nasty,” she commented, shuddering.

“It’s not poison?” said Harry anxiously.

“No – but it’s like ice.”

“Ooh,” Fred said suddenly. “Fire barriers for sale in our shop along with potions to get you through them...”

George grinned wildly, scribbling it down in his notebook. “Perfect to capture the person who is where they shouldn’t be.”

“Exactly,” his twin said.

“Quick, go, before it wears off.”

“Always thinking of others,” Molly murmured about Harry.

“Good luck – take care –”

“GO!”

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire. Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

“Here I come,” he said and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn’t feel them – for a moment he could see

nothing but dark fire – then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

George said, “Cue ominous music,” to lighten the mood, and it surprisingly worked. People laughed a little and the tenseness was gone.

There was already someone there – but it wasn’t Snape. It wasn’t even Voldemort.

“That’s what they think,” Harry muttered so softly that only Ginny heard him.

“Who was it?” Sirius cried out.

“Who? Who? WHO?” George said loudly for a joke.

Fred pulled an owl treat out of his pocket and threw it at his twin, who caught it in his mouth and actually ate it, much to the disgust of the women.

25 Points: If you can tell me what Harry said after Ron escaped from the Devil's Snare in the movie.

It was Ree's turn to read now. She took the book from Charlie and cleared her throat before beginning to read.

## Chapter Seventeen: The Man With Two Faces

Harry sighed. For the first time, he was going to hear his grandmother read him a story. He never truly realized just how much he'd missed out on, not having grandparents.

It was Quirrell.

Sirius shrieked loudly. "Not the Defense Professor!" he screamed dramatically.

Severus smirked in amusement. He'd known who it was for quite a while now.

"You!" gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

"So it was all an act," Remus stated matter-of-factly.

"Me," he said calmly. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter."

"But I thought – Snape – "

"Severus?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

"OVERGROWN BAT! Who does he think he's talking about here?" Severus raged. "That bastard! Overgrown bat, Merlin's most hairy toes!"

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

“Yes, it could,” the whole room chorused together.

“But Snape tried to kill me!”

“No, no, no. I tried to kill you.

Most of the women shuddered at this.

Sirius just looked like he was seriously contemplating murder.

Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at the Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you.

“Well, that’s convenient,” Minerva muttered. “What are the odds of that happening?”

“Three-hundred twenty to one,” Luna stated.

“Is it really?”

“Actually, I have no idea what the odds are. I just thought that number sounded good,” Luna said, smiling benignly.

Several people rolled their eyes, but most of them grinned.

Another few seconds and I’d have got you off that broom. I’d have managed it before then if Snape hadn’t been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you.”

James stood and walked over to Severus. He held out a hand and said, “I know I’ve been a right terrible git and a bully, but you still saved my son. I’m sorry for bullying you. I’d kinda like to be friends now, if you don’t mind too terribly.”

Severus eyed the hand, then slowly reached out and shook it. “Apology accepted. Friends,” he confirmed.

Remus and Sirius both stood up then, and also apologized and shook Severus' hand.

Ree looked somewhat teary eyed, and Harry beamed with pride at his father. He really had felt terrible that his father had behaved just like the very people he most despised.

“Snape was trying to save me?”

“You didn't have to sound so shocked, you know,” Severus said, sounding miffed.

“Of course,” said Quirrell coolly. “Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn't do it again. Funny, really ... he needn't have bothered. I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning, he did make himself unpopular ... and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight.”

Sirius growled angrily.

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

Remus' eyes glowed with rage. If he could, he probably would have turned into a wolf, leapt into the book, and killed Quirrell.

“You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school at Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone.”

“Isn't Quirrell in Alice's defense class?” James asked Lily suddenly.

Lily thought for a moment. “Yes, I think he is.”

“Good.”

All three Marauders looked gleeful.

“You let the troll in?”

“Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls – you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off – and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn’t even manage to bite Snape’s leg off properly.”

Sirius looked thoughtful. “I suggest we help Hagrid ‘train’ his Cerberus, and train it to attack anyone wearing turbans.”

“Ooh, good idea, Padfoot!” Remus said, impressed. “That’s really quite brilliant.”

“Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror.”

“Oh, like that’s going to work on a Potter,” Minerva muttered.

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

“Brilliant,” Dumbledore muttered, looking as though Christmas had come early and Dobby had given him a house full of socks.

“This mirror is the key to finding the Stone,” Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. “Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this ... but he’s in London ... I’ll be far away by the time he gets back ...”

“Idiot!” Minerva said and smacked the back of the Headmaster’s head.

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him concentrating on the mirror.

“I like this kid!” Snape said in appreciation.



“I saw you and Snape in the Forest – ” he blurted out.

“Yes,” said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. “He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I’d got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me – as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side ...”

Lily paled.

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

“I see the Stone ... I’m presenting it to my master ... but where is it?”

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn’t give. He had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

“But Snape always seemed to hate me so much.”

“Oh, he does,” said Quirrell casually, “heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn’t you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead.”

“I’m not going to treat you that way this time around,” Snape said. “I refuse to turn into a bullying git.”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing – I thought Snape was threatening you ...”

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell’s face.

“ Sometimes,” he said, “I find it hard to follow my master’s instructions – he is a great wizard and I am weak – ”

“VOLDEMORT WAS IN THE SCHOOL?”Dumbledore yelled.

“You mean he was there in the classroom with you?” Harry gasped.

“He is with me wherever I go,” said Quirrell quietly.

“Shit!” Severus said loudly.

Dumbledore even looked scared.

“I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was.

“Idiot,” Draco muttered. “Letting himself be manipulated that way.”

There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it ... Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me.” Quirrell shivered suddenly.

Dudley whimpered.

“He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the Stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me ... decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me ...”

“Well, bugger!” Neville declared.

Quirrell’s voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley – how could he have been so stupid? He’d seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry shuddered at the memory.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

“I don’t understand ... is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?”

Dumbledore chuckled in amusement. "That would only keep him from ever retrieving the Stone."

Harry's mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it – which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up to?

"Absolutely brilliant," Severus said.

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes round his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself.

"Nutters," George and Fred said together.

"What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself.

Dudley sobbed loudly at this. "NOOO!" he wailed. "I knew it would happen! The mysterious voice is there! It always is!"

Petunia looked concerned. What was wrong with her little boy?

Vernon just looked embarrassed. His son was supposed to be braver than that.

"Use the boy ... use the boy ..."

"Well, that can't be good," Charles said.

"That's obvious," Charlie replied, rolling his eyes.

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

“Yes – Potter – come here.”

He clapped his hands once and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

“Come here,” Quirrell repeated. “Look in the mirror and tell me what you see.”

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. I must look and lie about what I see, that’s all.

“Ah,” Severus said, “if only the Dark Lord weren’t a Legilimens.”

“Alas,” Dumbledore added his two Knuts, “he is as good a Legilimens as I.”

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell’s turban.

“Now that I’m older, I realize that it was the smell of rotting flesh disguised by garlic cloves in the turban,” Harry said, shuddering.

Everyone looked ill at that statement.

He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket – and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow – incredibly – he’d got the Stone.

“Wow!” James said in awe.

“Brilliant,” said Neville who’d never heard the complete story ‘til now.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said, but received glares for the effort.

“Well?” said Quirrell impatiently. “What do you see?”

Harry screwed up his courage.

“I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore,” he invented. “I – I’ve won the House Cup for Gryffindor.”

Sirius grinned. “An excellent lie considering the circumstances, Harry is definitely a true Marauder!”

Quirrell cursed again.

“Get out of the way,” he said. As Harry moved aside he felt the Sorcerer’s Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

“YES!” Draco yelled suddenly.

“RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!” Dudley agreed.

But he hadn’t walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn’t moving his lips.

“He lies ... He lies ...”

“Raise your hand if you saw that one coming,” Ginny said.

Everyone but the two elder Dursleys raised their hands. They didn’t want to join in.

“Apparently, Petunia and Vernon are too stupid to have seen it coming,” Snape sneered.

Petunia looked affronted but couldn’t defend herself as she was still silenced.

“Potter, come back here!” Quirrell shouted. “Tell the truth! What did you just see?”

The high voice spoke again.

“Let me speak to him ... face to face ...”

“Master, you are not strong enough!”

“Ooh,” Snape winced. “Never tell the Dark Lord something like that! It’s a sure way to get yourself killed.”

Harry nodded in agreement.

“I have strength enough ... for this ...”

Harry felt as if the Devil’s Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn’t move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell’s head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

“Why?” Sirius asked, confused.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn’t make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell’s head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

Severus and Dudley both shuddered violently.

“Harry Potter ...” it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backwards but his legs wouldn’t move.

“See what I have become?” the face said. “Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another’s body ... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds ... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks ...

you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest ... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own ... Now ... why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

Dudley screamed and crawled under the table to hide.

Hermione and Lily, who were both wearing skirts, immediately crossed the legs and pulled their skirts tight against their legs so Dudley wouldn't see anything.

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backwards.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me ... or you'll meet the same end as you parents ... they died begging me for mercy ..."

"Oh that's rich," James said snootily. "The day I beg Voldemort for anything, is the day I French kiss Snape. No offense or anything, Snape," he finished.

"None taken," Severus waved it off. "I completely understand."

"LIAR!" Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backwards at him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching ..." it hissed. "I always value bravery ... Yes, boy, you're parents were brave ... I killed your father first, and he put up a courageous fight ... but your mother needn't have died ... she was trying to protect you ..."

"Huh?" James said, "that makes no sense. If we had made him so mad that he decided to kill us, then why..."

"The prophecy," Harry said. "He wasn't after you; he was after me. You were just a bonus to him, three for the price of one."

Lily and James both shuddered.

Ree continued to read after a long moment of silence

... Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain.”

“Okay, now that’s just cruel,” Sirius said, “bringing up your dead mother and saying something like that about her death.”

“NEVER!”

Harry sprang towards the flame door, but Voldemort screamed, “SEIZE HIM!” and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell’s hand close on his wrist.

“Kick him! Bite him! Claw him! DECK him!” Sirius screamed out.

“Get him in a headlock!” Dudley added. Petunia and Vernon stared at their son as though they’d never seen him before.

At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry’s scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him.

“Why?” Remus asked.

The pain in his head lessened – he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers – they were blistering before his eyes.

“Accidental magic?” Lily asked the professors.

“Damned if I know!” Severus said, perplexed.

“Seize him! SEIZE HIM!” shrieked Voldemort again and Quirrell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet, landing on top of him, both hands round Harry’s neck –



“NO!” almost all of the women in the room yelled.

Harry’s scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

“Serves him right,” Fred, George, James, and of all people, Severus said.

“Master, I cannot hold him – my hands – my hands!”

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms – Harry could see they looked burnt, raw, red and shiny.

“Impressive burns, Harry,” Charlie said.

“Then kill him, fool, and be done!” screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell’s face –

“AAAARGH!”

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn’t touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain – his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him doing a curse.

“Very Slytherin,” Draco said, impressed.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off – the pain in Harry’s head was building – he couldn’t see – he could only hear Quirrell’s terrible shrieks and Voldemort’s yells of, “KILL HIM! KILL HIM!” and other voices, maybe in Harry’s own head, crying, “Harry! Harry!”

“Man, Voldemort is really determined to kill you, isn’t he?” Charlie said.

“Yup,” Harry confirmed.

He felt Quirrell’s arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down ... down ... down ...

“Magical exhaustion,” Ree said, “Harry probably slept for a week afterwards.”

Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy.

The Marauders snickered.

He blinked. It wasn’t the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

He blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him.

“Good afternoon, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: “Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He’s got the Stone! Sir, quick – ”

“Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times,” said Dumbledore. “Quirrell does not have the Stone.”

“Wait, do you call everyone ‘dear boy’?” Charles asked.

“No,” Dumbledore replied, shocked. “I also call them ‘dear girl’ depending on the gender of the person.”

Everyone groaned in annoyance.

“Then who does? Sir, I – ”

“Harry, please relax, or Madame Pomfrey will have me thrown out.”

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the sweet-shop.

“I had to give most of it away,” Harry said. “It was just too much.”

“Tokens from your friends and admirers,” said Dumbledore, beaming. “What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows.

Sirius snorted then, as though it were a signal, the Marauders, Harry included, and Fred and George all burst into laughter.

I believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madame Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it.”

“Rotten luck too,” Harry said. “I would have hung it on the wall of my room at the Dursleys’ as a souvenir.”

The elder two Dursleys looked ill, but Dudley said, “COOL!”

Fred and George puffed out their chests in pride, and Ginny pecked Harry on the cheek.

“How long have I been here?”

“Three days.

“NO WAY!” Ree yelled in shock. “Magical exhaustion always takes a lot longer than that to fix.”

“Grandmum,” Harry said, drawing looks of shock from people, “Suffice it to say, that I have more than stumped Madam Pomfrey on numerous occasions. I am a Healer’s worst nightmare, or as the case may be, their dream come true.”

Ree looked a bit teary-eyed when he called her 'Grandmum', but looked intrigued by the rest of his statement. "Can I give you a physical after this chapter?" she asked. "I love medical anomalies."

Harry blushed, but agreed.

Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried."

"But sir, the Stone – "

"I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you.

Severus breathed a huge sigh of relief.

I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say."

All of the Potters and soon-to-be Potters looked at Harry with pride.

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?"

"We must have crossed in mid-air. No sooner had I reached London, than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you – "

"You realized that my butt," Snape sneered. "More like the Minister had no clue why you were there."

"It was you."

"I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were, I couldn't have kept him off the Stone much longer – "

"Not the Stone, boy, you – the effort involved nearly killed you.

Ree looked shocked and interested, at this. Overall, the look on her face was quite amusing to Sirius.

For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” said Harry blankly. “But your friend – Nicolas Flamel –

”  
“Oh, you know about Nicolas?” said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. “You did do the thing properly, didn’t you?”

“Like I said, it was a set-up,” Severus declared.

Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat and agreed it’s all for the best.”

“But that means he and his wife will die, won’t they?”

“They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die.”

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry’s face.

“To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.

“You’re barmy!” Draco said, staring at Dumbledore incredulously.

You know, the Stone was really not a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all – the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things which are worst for them.”

Severus rolled his eyes.

Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

“Sir?” said Harry. “I’ve been thinking ... Sir – even if the Stone’s gone, Vol -, I mean, You-Know-Who – ”

“Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

“Wait!” Harry said suddenly. “Then shouldn’t we be calling him Tom?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore chuckled. “We probably should.”

Ginny looked rather pale during this conversation.

“Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort’s going to try other ways of coming back, isn’t he? I mean, he hasn’t gone, has he?”

“No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share ... not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time – and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power.”

Harry snorted at this.

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, “Sir, there are some things I’d like to know, if you can tell me ... things I want to know that truth about ...”

“The truth.” Dumbledore sighed. “It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you’ll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie.”

Harry arched a brow. "Neglecting to tell the truth can, at times, be just as bad as lying, Sir," he said to the Headmaster.

"Well ... Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?"

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time.

"Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day ... put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older ... I know you hate to hear this ... when you are ready, you will know."

"Yeah, right!" Harry said. "That was a load of Hippogriff excrement!"

Charlie cringed. "That stuff smells terrible, too."

"Why do you think I said it?" Harry asked rhetorically.

And Harry knew it was no good to argue.

"But why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

Ree and Minerva both frowned.

"Lots of mothers have died to protect their children, but the children still died as well, so what are you on?" Ree asked.

“Let me guess,” Minerva hissed. “You made up that load of dung to hide from Harry the fact that is more powerful than anyone else, and thereby, to avoid him asking questions about why he was only average in class.”

Dumbledore cringed away from the irate witch.

Dumbledore now became very interested in a bird out on the window-sill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet. When he had found his voice again, Harry said, “And the invisibility cloak – do you know who sent it to me?”

“Good question,” Arthur said.

“Ah – your father happened to leave it in my possession and I thought you might like it.”

“Why would I do that?” James asked.

Harry shrugged.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Useful things ... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here.”

James snorted. “It’s not stealing if they offer it to you!”

“And there’s something else ...”

“Fire away.”

“Quirrell said Snape – ”

“Professor Snape, Harry.”

“Yes, him – Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?”



“Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy ...

“I beg your pardon, but neither Draco nor I bullied each other. We’d just insult or hex each other. Give and take, you know, equals,” Harry said

And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive.”

“What?”

“He saved his life.”

“What?”

“Yes ...” said Dumbledore dreamily. “Funny, the way people’s minds work, isn’t it? Professor Snape couldn’t bear being in your father’s debt ... I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father’s memory in peace ...”

“That makes sense...sorta,” Remus said.

Harry tried to understand this but it made his head pound, so he stopped.

“And, sir, there’s one more thing ...”

“Just the one?”

“Amazing,” Fred said.

George continued, “Free rein to ask as many questions as he likes...”

“And,” Fred continued, “he only asks five!”

“How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?”

“Ah, now, I’m glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that’s saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone – find it, but not use it – would be able to get it, otherwise they’d just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life.

“Brilliant,” George said. “Fred, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Are we twins or not?” Fred retorted.

My brain surprises even me sometimes ... Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomit flavored one,

“Eeewww!” the girls and Sirius said together.

...and since then I’m afraid I’ve rather lost my liking for them – but I think I’ll be safe with a nice toffee, don’t you?”

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, “Alas! Earwax!”

“ Rotten luck!” Ron said. “First vomit, then earwax, what next...pickled toad?”

Dumbledore shuddered at that thought.

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was a nice woman, but very strict.

“POPPY!” Sirius cried out blissfully, making Harry groan.

“Just five minutes,” Harry pleaded.

“Absolutely not.”

“You let Professor Dumbledore in ...”

“Well, of course, that was the Headmaster, quite different. You need rest.”

“I am resting, look, lying down and everything. Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey ...”

“Oh, very well,” she said. “But five minutes only.”

“It worked?” the three Marauders, Charles and Charlie all said together.

And she let Ron and Hermione in.

“Harry!”

Hermione looked ready to fling her arms around him again, but Harry was glad she held herself in as his head was still very sore.

“Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to – Dumbledore was so worried – ”

“ Well, magical exhaustion is nothing to be trifled with,” Ree explained. “There’s always the chance of turning into a Squib.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Really.”

“ The whole school’s talking about it,” said Ron. “What really happened?”

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Harry told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Ron and Hermione were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Harry told them what was under Quirrell’s turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

“So the Stone’s gone?” said Ron finally. “Flamel’s just going to die?”

“That’s what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that – what was it? – ‘to the well organized mind, death is but the next great adventure’.”

“I always said he was off his rocker,” said Ron, looking quite impressed at how mad his hero was.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said, smiling. “Lemon Drop?”

“Err,” Ron muttered. “No...thanks.”

“Ahh. Pity.”

“So what happened to you two?” said Harry.

” Well I got back all right,” said Hermione. “I brought Ron round – that took a while – and we were dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall. He already knew – he just said, ‘Harry’s gone after him, hasn’t he?’ and hurtled off to the third floor.”

“Set up!” Severus sang.

“D’you think he meant you to do it?” said Ron. “Sending you your father’s cloak and everything?”

“It’s chess!” Ron had an epiphany. “Dumbledore is playing a giant chess game, and we’re the pawns!”

“Ten points to Mr. Weasley!” Snape barked.

“Well,” Hermione exploded, “if he did – I mean to say – that’s terrible – you could have been killed.”

“ No, it isn’t,” said Harry thoughtfully. “He’s a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he

knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could ..."

"Brilliant, my boy," Dumbledore said in awe.

Harry arched a brow, looking uncannily like Severus. "Indeed," he said, channeling his inner snarkiness.

"Yeah, Dumbledore's barking, all right," said Ron proudly. "Listen, you've got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course – you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you – but the food'll be good."

James and Charles both groaned.

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

"You've had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT!" she said firmly.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

Ree looked shocked.

"I want to go to the feast," he told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. "I can, can't I?"

"NO!" Ree said. "Do you want to do permanent damage to your magical core?"

"Professor Dumbledore says you are allowed to go," she said sniffily, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn't realize how risky feasts could be. "And you have another visitor."

"Oh good," said Harry. "Who is it?"

Hagrid sidled through the door as he spoke. As usual when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Harry, took one look at him and burst into tears.

“It’s – all – my – ruddy – fault!” he sobbed, his face in his hands. “I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only thing he didn’t know an’ I told him! Yeh could’ve died! All fer a dragon egg! I’ll never drink again!”

“That will be the day,” Minerva muttered.

I should be chucked out an’ made ter live as a Muggle!”

“Like that would work,” Severus said. “He’s huge!”

“Hagrid!” said Harry, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. “Hagrid, he’d have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we’re talking about, he’d have found out even if you hadn’t told him.”

“You are so sweet,” Lily said to Harry, making him blush.

“Yeh could’ve died!” sobbed Hagrid. “An’ don’ say the name!”

“VOLDEMORT!” Harry bellowed, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped crying.

“Wow!” Draco said, impressed.

“I’ve met him and I’m calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it’s gone, he can’t use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I’ve got loads ...”

“Oh dear Merlin, you’re turning into the barmy old coot,” Minerva said in shock. “Here, have a sweet, he says. Like that’ll solve everything,” she ridiculed.

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, "That reminds me. I've got yeh a present."

"Aww," Lily cooed.

"It's not a stoat sandwich, is it?" said Harry anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle.

"Nah. Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. 'Course, he shoulda sacked me instead – anyway, got yeh this ..."

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Harry opened it curiously. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at him from every page were his mother and father.

"Aww," Molly cooed, this time. "He gave you that album you carry everywhere? For that, he gets a tin of fudge for Christmas!"

"Sent owls off ter all yer parents' old school friends, askin' fer photos ... Knew yeh didn' have any ... D'yeh like it?"

"He must have contacted you, Remus, though I can't imagine who else he would have contacted?" Harry said.

"Oy, what about me?" Sirius asked.

"You were indisposed."

"Peter?" asked James.

"Indisposed," Hermione said.

"Marlene McKinnon?" came from Lily.

"Worse," Molly said.

"Alice?" Lily tried again.

“St. Mungos, permanently,” Neville answered, “and my dad too.”

“He probably also contacted the Diggorys, now that I think on it,” Harry said.

“What happened to everyone?” Lily asked weakly.

“War,” Ginny answered, making the seventeen year olds flinch.

Harry couldn't speak, but Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey's fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin's winning the House Cup for the seventh year in a row.

Severus smirked.

A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were standing up to look at him.

“James would have bowed to them,” Sirius said.

“You're barmy,” Harry told his father.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

“Another year gone!” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are a little fuller than they were ... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before the next year starts ...



Minerva and Severus groaned.

“Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw have four hundred and twenty-six, and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two.”

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

“Gee...thanks, Potter,” Draco sneered.

“You’re welcome,” Harry replied good-naturedly, making his dad and godfather laugh.

“Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin,” said Dumbledore. “However, recent events must be taken into account.”

“That was really rude of you,” Harry said. “If you were gonna do it, then you should have done it before the feast.”

Lily and Hermione nodded in agreement.

Dumbledore blushed.

The room went very still. The Slytherins’ smiles faded a little.

“Ahem,” said Dumbledore. “I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes ...

“First – to Mr. Ronald Weasley ...”

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with bad sunburn.

Ron groaned.

“... for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points.”

Gryffindor cheers nearly reached the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other Prefects, “My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall’s giant chess set!”

“The only time he ever complimented me,” Ron muttered.

At last there was silence again.

“Second – to Miss Hermione Granger ... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire,

Several people snorted or rolled their eyes at that.

I award Gryffindor house fifty points.”

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears.

The girl in question was redder than her boyfriend’s hair.

Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves – they were a hundred points up.

“Third – to Mr. Harry Potter ...” said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet. “... for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points.”

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points – exactly the same as Slytherin.

Severus moaned. Apparently, the younger Snape was freer with his emotions.

They had tied for the House Cup – if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

“There are all kinds of courage,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom.”

Now, Neville was the one blushing.

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before.

“HEY! I earn points all the time in Herbology,” Neville said, annoyed.

Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn't have looked more stunned and horrified if he'd just had the Body-Bind curse put on him.

Draco huffed.

“Which means,” Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, “we need a little change of decoration.”

“No, no, no...” moaned Severus.

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible forced smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew at once that Snape's feelings toward him hadn't changed one jot. This didn't worry Harry. It seemed

as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

Neville stared at Harry in shock. "You're my hero," he said. "You aren't scared of Snape at all."

It was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls ... he would never, ever forget tonight.

"But it wasn't a Patronus memory," Harry said.

"What is your Patronus memory?" Hermione asked.

Harry blushed. "They're sitting right there, Hermione." He nodded his head in the direction of the Marauders and his mother.

The four people mentioned looked embarrassed but proud.

Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years.

"Boy, was Lucius furious about that," Draco said.

Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one.

Neville blushed.

They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the

holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly);

Molly glared at her son, but he just grinned cheekily at her.

Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the country-side became greener and tidier; eating Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

"I hate summer," Harry moaned, causing a fresh round of glares aimed at the Headmaster.

It took a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You know, I never actually thought about why they did that before," Luna commented, making everyone stare at her in shock.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you – I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Harry. "I'll need something to look forward to."

People jostled them as they moved forwards toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:

"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"More people said goodbye to me than had talked to me all year," Harry said, shaking his head in confusion.

"Still famous," said Ron grinning at him.

“Not where I’m going, I promise you,” said Harry.

He, Ron, and Hermione passed through the gateway together.

“There he is, Mum, there he is, look!”

It was Ginny Weasley, Ron’s younger sister, but she wasn’t pointing at Ron.

Ginny moaned in embarrassment.

“You were cute,” Harry said, trying to make her feel better, and it apparently helped some.

“Harry Potter!” she squealed. “Look, Mum! I can see – ”

“Be quiet, Ginny, and it’s rude to point.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them.

“Busy year?” she said.

“Very,” said Harry. “Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Always so well mannered,” Molly commented happily.

“Oh, it was nothing, dear.”

“Ready, are you?”

It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

Dudley, who had rejoined them at the table, actually looked embarrassed, Harry noted with awe.

“You must be Harry’s family!” said Mrs. Weasley.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Uncle Vernon. “Hurry up, boy, we haven’t got all day.” He walked away.

“A ruder man, I’ve never met,” Molly said, glaring at Vernon with distaste.

Harry hung back for a last word with Ron and Hermione.

“See you over the summer, then.”

“Hope you have – er – a good holiday,” said Hermione, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

Hermione shuddered in remembrance.

“Oh, I will,” said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face.

“Why?” James asked incredulously.

“They don’t know we’re not allowed to use magic at home. I’m going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer ...”

Almost everyone laughed hysterically at that.

After about fifteen minutes, Harry said, “Will you two behave if I remove the silencing charm from you?” to his aunt and uncle.

They nodded.

Harry waved an arm, and the two Muggles began conversing in furious whispers.

“Well, Grandmum,” Harry said, turning to Ree. “You ready for my physical?”

She beamed and said, “I most certainly am!”

- - -

Behind a Harry-conjured partition...

“I’ll kill those monsters with my bare hands!” Ree yelled out.

“Oh, come on, it can’t be that bad,” Harry said.

“Thirty broken bones, and that’s just before the age of eleven! None of them were set properly. The only reason you aren’t walking with a limp, and your face isn’t lopsided is because of your magic!”

Harry blushed.

Ree screeched suddenly. “TEN YEARS OF MALNOURISHMENT! THOSE BASTARDS!”

A minute and a half later...

“You had the measles and were never treated!”

“Really?” Harry asked in shock.

A scan later...

“Oh, HELL NO!”

“What is it now?”

“Stunted growth! Blocked Metamorphmagus powers! BLOCKED ELEMENTAL POWERS! WHAT NEXT?”

Fifteen minutes later...



“A Basilisk,” she muttered weakly, sitting down in a chair that Harry barely managed to conjure in time for her to land on.

“You survived a bloody Basilisk bite!”

“Yep.”

“Nearly kissed by a Dementor?”

“Twice.”

“A Blood Quill?”

“More times than I care to remember!”

“A poisoned dagger!”

“Wait! When the bleep did that happen?”

“According to my scan? A little over a year ago.”

“Bloody hell, that rat tried to kill me during the resurrection ceremony!”

“Resurrection ceremony? Do I want to know?”

“I was kidnapped, and my blood was taken against my will to resurrect good-ole Tommy-boy.”

“Five Memory Charms?”

“WHAT THE?”

“One when you were five, probably after a bout of major accidental magic. Then when you were eleven, probably to prevent you from remember exactly what happened to Quirrell. You might have seen him die. One again when you were twelve, no idea why. Another when you were thirteen, and again when you were fifteen. Do you

want them removed, even knowing that the memories could be very traumatic?”

“YES!”

“Reiterate!”

Ten minutes later...

“So...Vernon tried to kill me after I vanished a baseball bat that he was trying to hit me with?”

“The Muggle is going to die!”

“I killed Quirrell using accidental magic?”

“So it would seem.”

“And that bastard Lockhart raped Penelope Clearwater, and I walked in on it?”

“Yuck, and apparently.”

“AND DUMBLEDORE CONSPIRED WITH SNAPE TO KEEP SIRIUS ON THE RUN?!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but...okay...”

“And the Umbitch used the Cruciatus on me in an attempt to gain information for Tom?”

“I’ll murder her in her sleep. No...I’ll turn her into a flea, a harmless, little flea, and then I’ll put that flea in a box, and then I’ll put that box inside of another box, and then I’ll mail that box to myself, and when it arrives...I’ll smash it with a hammer! It’s brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, I tell you! Genius, I say!” Ree cackled insanely while Harry looked on in pride.

“You’re the best Grandmum in the whole wide world!” Harry declared, suddenly hugging her tightly.

“Thank you, dear. So...what does this...Umbitch(?) person look like?”

“Ah, scary beyond all reason?”

Ree shuddered. “Perhaps we should try something a little more...descriptive.”

“She looks like a giant toad, and that hideous bow she always wears looks like a fly perched on her head.” Harry shuddered.

“Yup, scary beyond all reason sums it up nicely.”

- - -

After Harry vanished the screen and chair...

Ginny was standing next to the twins when Harry approached them. “So, what did you guys do while we were gone?” Harry asked her as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Two words...Operation Nemesis,” she replied.

He looked nervous. “I’m not sure I want to know the details.”

“You don’t!” the twins chorused.

Just then, Moera walked in making the room go silent.

“So...I see you are done with the first book. What have you decided?” she asked Dumbledore.

How was that for a cliff-hanger?

SEQUEL UP SOON! "What To Do? Part 2"

Have fun guessing the hidden movie references. 10 Points each.